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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MAY

THE NEW NEIGHBORS
by Frederik Pohl

ROGUEWORLD
by Charles Sheffield

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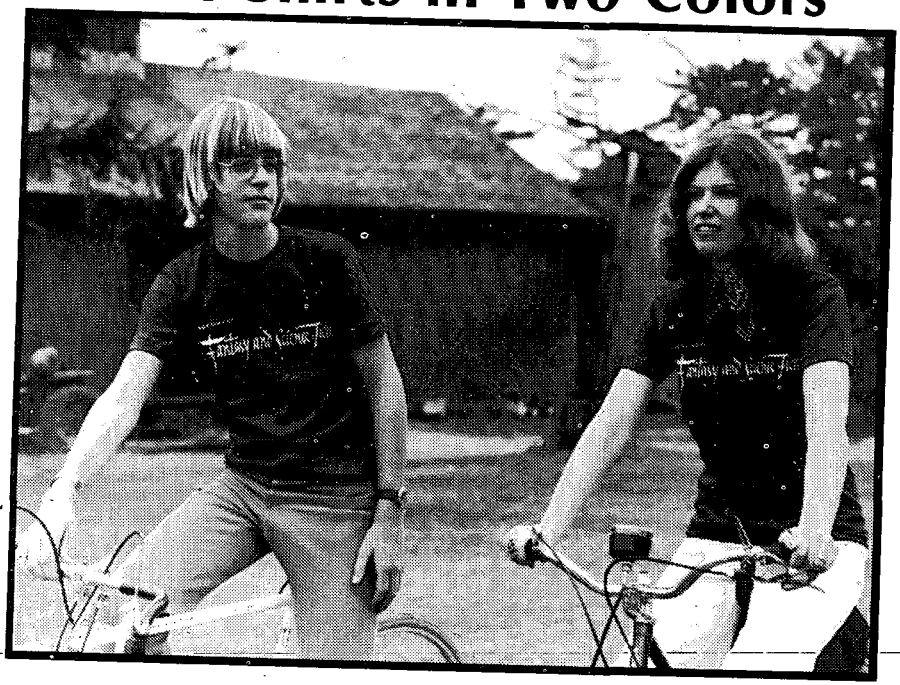

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Charles Sheffield's last story here, "The Devil of Malkirk," was fantasy; his new story is science fiction at its best, a tale about a scientific institute's battle for survival and a rescue mission to a satellite of Neptune, out at the edge of the solar system.

Rogueworld

BY

CHARLES SHEFFIELD

The laws of probability not only permit coincidences; they absolutely insist on them.

I was sitting in the pilot's chair with McAndrew at my shoulder. Neither of us had spoken for a long time. We were in low polar orbit, sweeping rapidly across the surface of Vandell with all pod sensors wide open. I didn't know what McAndrew was thinking, but my mind wasn't fully on the displays. Part of me was far away — one and a quarter light-years away, back on Earth.

Why not? Our attention here was not necessary. The surveillance sensors were linked to the shipboard main computer, and the work was done automatically. If anything new turned up we would hear of it at once. But nothing new could happen — nothing that mattered.

For the moment, I needed time to myself. Time to think about Jan; to remember her seventeen years, as a baby, as a slender child, as a fierce new intelligence, as a young woman; time to resent the chain of circumstance that had brought her and Wicklund here, to die. Somewhere below these opalescent clouds, down on the cold surface of the planet, our sensor systems were seeking two corpses. Nothing else mattered.

I knew that McAndrew shared my sorrow, but he handled it in a different way. His attention was focused on the data displays, in a concentration so intense that my presence didn't matter at all. His jaw was slack, and his eyes lacked all expression. Every couple of minutes he shook his head and muttered to himself: "This makes no sense — no sense at all."

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I stared at the screen in front of me, where the dark vortex had again appeared. It came and went, clearly visible on some passes, vanished on others. Now it looked like a funnel, a sooty conical channel down through the glowing atmosphere, the only break in the planet's swirling cloud cover. We had passed right over it twice before, the first time with rising hopes; but the sensors had remained quiet. It was not a signal. It had to be a natural feature, something like Jupiter's Red Spot, some random coincidence of twisting gas streams.

Coincidence. Again, coincidence.

"The laws of probability not only permit coincidences; they absolutely insist on them."

I couldn't get McAndrew's words out of my head.

He had spoken them months ago, on a day that I would never forget. It was Jan's seventeenth birthday, the first time of choice. I was down on Earth, choking on the dirty air, meeting with the new head of External Affairs. McAndrew was at his office at the Penrose Institute. We were both trying to work, but I for one wasn't succeeding too well. I wondered what was going through Jan's head, waiting for graduation from the Luna system?

"Naturally, there will have to be some changes," Tallboy was saying. "That's to be expected, I'm sure you'll agree. We are reviewing all programs, and though I am sure that my predecessor and I" — for the third time he had avoided using Woolford's name — "agree on overall objectives, we may have slightly different priorities."

Dr. Tallboy was a tall man, with a lofty brow and keen, intellectual eyes. Although we had shaken hands and muttered the conventional greetings a couple of times before, this was our first working meeting.

I pulled my wandering attention back to him. "When will the program review be finished?"

He shook his head and smiled broadly (but there were no laugh lines around his eyes). "As I'm sure you know very well, Captain Roker, these things take time. There has been a change of administration. We have many new staff to train. There have been new budget cuts, too, and the Office of External Affairs has suffered more than most. We will continue all the essential programs, be assured of that. But it is also my mandate to expend public funds wisely, and that cannot be done in haste."

"What about the Penrose Institute's experimental programs?" I said — a bit abruptly, but so far Tallboy had offered nothing more than general answers. I knew I couldn't afford to seem impatient, but my meeting wouldn't last much longer.

He hesitated, then sneaked a quick look at the crib sheets of notes in front of him on the desk. It didn't seem to help, because when he looked up the fine and noble brow was wrinkled in perplexity.

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"I'm thinking particularly of the Alpha Centauri expedition," I prompted him. "Dr. Tallboy, a quick go-ahead on that means a great deal to us."

"Of course." He was nodding at me seriously. "A great deal. Er, I'm not completely familiar with that *particular* activity, you understand, but I assure you, as soon as my staff review is completed...."

Our meeting lasted fifteen more minutes, but long before I felt I had failed. I had come here to push for a decision, to persuade Tallboy that the program should go ahead as planned; but politics changed everything. Forget the fact that McAndrew and I had been planning the Alpha Centauri expedition for a year; forget the fact the the *Hoatzin* had been provisioned, fueled, and inspected, and the flight plans filed long since with the USF. Forget the masses of new observational equipment that we had loaded onto the ship with such loving care. That had been under the old administration. When the new one came in everything had to start again from scratch. And not one damned thing I could do about it.

I did manage to extract one promise from Tallboy before he ushered me out with polite assurances of his interest and commitment to the institute's work. He would visit the institute personally, as soon as his schedule permitted. It wasn't anything to celebrate, but it was all I could squeeze out of him.

"He'll visit here *in person?*" said McAndrew — I had run for the phone as soon as I cleared the Office of External Affairs. "Do you think he'll do it?"

I nodded. "I didn't leave it up to him. I saw his secretary on the way out, and made sure that we're in the book. He'll do it."

"When?" McAndrew had been in Limperis's office when I called, and it was the older man who leaned forward to ask the question.

"Eight days from now. That was the first gap in his schedule. He'll spend most of the day at the institute."

"Then we're home free," said McAndrew. He was cracking his finger joints — a sure sign of high excitement. "Jeanie, we can put on an all-day show here that'll just blow him away. Wenig has a new E-M field stabilizer, Macedo says she can build a cheap detector for small Halo collapsers, and I've got an idea for a better kernel shield. And if we can ever get him to talk about it, Wicklund's cooking up something new and big out on Triton Station. Man, I'm telling you, the institute hasn't been this productive in years. Get Tallboy here, and he'll go out of his mind."

Limperis shot a quick sideways glance at McAndrew, then looked back at the screen. He raised his eyebrows. I could read the expression on that coal-black, guileless face, and I agreed with him completely. McAndrew might be the brightest star of the Penrose Insitute and, according to his colleagues, the best combination of ex-

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perimental and theoretical talents since Newton. And if you wanted a man to quantize a nonlinear field, diagonalize a messy Hamiltonian, or dream up a delicate new observational test for theories of kernel creation, you couldn't possibly do better. But that would be his downfall now. He could never accept that the rest of the world might be less interested in physics than he was.

Limperis started that way, but years of budget battles as head of the institute had taught him to play in a different league. "So what do you think, Jeanie?" he said to me, when Mac had finished babbling.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "I couldn't read Tallboy. We'd better look up his background, see if that gives us some clues to what makes him tick. As it is, you'll have to try. Show him everything you've got at the institute, and hope for the best."

"What about the expedition?"

"Same for that. Tallboy acted as though he'd never heard of Alpha Centauri. The *Hoatzin*'s just about ready to go, but we need Tallboy's blessing. External Affairs controls all the—"

"Call from Luna," cut in a disembodied voice. *"Central Records for Professor McAndrew. Level Two priority. Will you accept interrupt, or prefer reschedule?"*

"Accept," said McAndrew and I together — even though it wasn't my call. It had to be from Jan.

"Voice, tonal, display or hard-copy output?"

"Voice," replied McAndrew firmly. I was less sure of that. He had done it so that I could received the message, too, but we would have to witness each other's disappointment if it were bad news.

"Message for Arthur Morton McAndrew," went on the neutral voice. *"Message begins. January Pelham, ID 128-129-00476, being of legal age of choice, will file for parental assignment as follows:-Father: Arthur Morton McAndrew, ID 226-788-44577. Mother: Jean Pelham Roker, ID 547-314-78281. Name change filed for January Pelham Roker McAndrew. Parental response and acceptance is required. Reply via Luna free circuit 33, link 442. Message ends."*

I had never seen McAndrew look so pleased. It was doubly satisfying to him to have me on the line when the word came through — I was sure that the Communications Group was trying to track me now through Tallboy's office, not knowing I was tapped into Mac's line.

"What's the formal date for parental assignment?" I asked.

There was a two-second pause while the computer made confirmation of identity from my voiceprint, sent that information over the link from L-4 to Luna, decided how to handle the situation, and connected us all into one circuit. *"Message for Jean Pelham Roker. Message begins: January Pelham, ID 128—"*

"No need to repeat," I said. "Mes-

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sage received. Repeat, what is the formal date for parental assignment?"

"Two hundred hours U.T., subject to satisfactory parental response."

"That's too soon," said McAndrew. "We won't have enough time for chromosomal confirmation."

"Chromosomal confirmation waived."

On the screen in front of me McAndrew blushed bright with surprise and pleasure. Not only had Jan filed for us as official parents as soon as legally permitted, she had done so without knowing or caring what the genetic records showed. The waiver was a definite statement: whether or not McAndrew was her biological father would make no difference to her; she had made her decision.

For what it was worth, I could have given my own assurance. Some evidence is just as persuasive to me as chromosomal mapping. No one who had seen that blind, inward look on Jan's face when she was tackling an abstract problem would ever doubt that she was McAndrew's flesh and blood. I had cursed that expression a hundred times, as McAndrew left me to worry alone while he disappeared on a voyage of exploration and discovery inside his own head.

Never mind; McAndrew had his good points.

"Parental acceptance by Jean Pelham Roker," I said.

"Parental acceptance by Arthur Morton McAndrew," said Mac.

Another brief pause, then: *"Acceptance received and recorded. Formal assignment confirmed for two hundred hours U.T. Arrange location through Luna link 33-442. Hard-copy output follows. Is there additional transfer?"*

"No."

"Link terminated."

While the computer initiated hard-copy output to the terminal at the institute, I did a little calculation.

"Mac, we have a problem — Jan's acceptance ceremony is set for the same time as Tallboy's visit."

"Of course." He looked surprised that I hadn't seen it immediately. "We can handle it. She'll come out here. She'll want to visit — she hasn't been to the institute since Wicklund went out to Triton Station."

"But you'll be too tied up with Tallboy to spend much time with her. What rotten luck."

McAndrew shrugged, and it was enough to start him talking. "Whenever a set of independent events occur randomly in time or space, you'll notice event-clusters. They're inevitable. That's all there is to coincidences. If you assume that event arrival times follow a Poisson distribution, and just go ahead and calculate the probability that a given number will occur in some small interval of time, you'll find—"

"Take him away," I said to Limperis.

He slapped McAndrew lightly on the shoulder. "Come on. Coincidence

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or not, this is a day for celebration. You're a father now, and thanks to Jeanie we've got Tallboy coming out here to see the show." He winked at me. "Though maybe Jan will change her mind when she hears Mac talk for a few hours, eh, Jeanie? Poor girl, she's not used to it, the way you are."

McAndrew just grinned. He was riding too high for a little gentle josh-ing to have any effect. "If you pity the poor lass at all," he said. "It should be for the Philistine space-jock of a moth-er she'll be getting. If I wanted to talk to Jan about probability distributions, she'd listen to me."

She probably would, too. I'd seen her math profiles.

Limperis was reaching out to cut the connection, but Mac hadn't quite finished. "You know, the laws of prob-ability not only permit coincidences," he said. "They—"

He was still talking when the screen went blank.

I had no more official business down on Earth, but I didn't head out at once. Limperis was quite right; it was a time for celebration — you didn't be-come a parent every day. I went over to the Asgard restaurant, up at the very top of Mile High, and ordered the full panoramic dinner. In some ways I wasted my money, because no matter what the sensories threw at me I hardly noticed them. I was thinking back through seventeen years, to the time when Jan was born, so small that she could not put her whole fist in the old silver thimble McAndrew's friends gave her as a birthgift.

It was a few years later that I real-ized we had something exceptional on our hands — Jan had breezed through every test they could give her. I felt as though I had a window to McAndrew's own past, because I was sure he had been the same way thirty years earlier. The mandatory separation years hadn't been too bad. McAndrew and I had spent parts of them on long trips out, where the Earth-years sped by in months of shipboard time. But I was very glad they were over now. In a few more days, McAndrew, Jan, and I would be officially and permanently related.

By the time I finished my meal I probably wore the same foolish smile as I had seen on Mac's face before Lim-peris cut the video. Neither of us could see beyond the coming ceremony to a grimmer future.

The next few days were too busy for much introspection. The Penrose In-stitute had been in free orbit, half a million miles out, but to make it more convenient for Tallboy's visit Limperis moved us back to the old L-4 position. In a general planning meeting we de-cided what we would show off, and how much time could be spared for each research activity. I'd never heard such squabbling. The concentration of brainpower found at the institute meant that a dozen or more important

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advances were competing for Tallboy's time. Limperis was as impartial and diplomatic as ever, but there was no way he could smooth Macedo's feelings when she learned that she would have less than ten minutes to show off three years of effort on electromagnetic coupling systems. And Wenig was even worse — he wanted to be in on all the presentations, and still have time to promote his own work on ultradense matter.

At the same time McAndrew was having problems of quite a different kind with Sven Wicklund. That young physicist was still out on Triton Station, where he had gone complaining that the Inner System was all far too crowded and cluttered and he needed some peace and quiet.

"What the devil's he up to out there?" grumbled McAndrew. "I need to know for the Tallboy briefing, but a one-way radio signal out to Neptune takes four hours — even if he wanted to talk, and he doesn't. And I'm sure he's on to something new and important. Blast him, what am I supposed to report?"

I wasn't too sympathetic. To me it seemed no more than poetic justice. McAndrew always refused to talk about his own ideas when they were in development — "half-cooked," to use his phrase.

But the institute needed all the impressive material they could find, so Mac continued to send long and futile messages needling Wicklund to tell him something — anything — about his latest work. He got nowhere.

"And he's the brightest of the lot of us," said McAndrew. Coming from him that was a real compliment. His colleagues were less convinced.

"I don't think so," said Wenig when I asked him. "Anyway, it's an impossible question. The two of them are quite different. Imagine that Newton and Einstein had lived at the same time. McAndrew's like Newton, as much at home with experiment as theory. And Wicklund's *all* theory, he needs help to change his pants. But it's still a fool question. Which is better, food or drink? — that makes as much sense. The main thing is that they're contemporaries, and they can talk to each other about what they're doing."

Except that Wicklund refused to do so, at least at this stage of his work. McAndrew finally gave up the effort to draw him out and concentrated on matters closer to home.

My own part in planning the show for Tallboy was a minor one. I have degrees in gravitational engineering and electrical engineering — as a certified space pilot I have to — but that wouldn't get me in as janitor at the institute. My job was to concentrate on the *Hoatzin*. Until we started work (budget permitting) on a more advanced model, this ship carried the best available version of the McAndrew Drive. It could manage a 100-G acceleration for months, and a 110-G for as long as the crew was willing to

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forgo kitchen and toilet facilities.

The Office of External Affairs officially owned *Hoatzin* and the institute operated her, but I secretly thought of the ship as mine. No one else had ever flown her.

I had faint hopes that Tallboy might like a demonstration flight, maybe a short run out to Saturn. We could be there and back in a couple of days. The ship was all ready, for that and more — if he approved of it, we were all set for the Alpha Centauri probe (forty-four days of shipboard time; not bad, when you remember that the first manned trip to Mars had taken more than nine months). We could be on our interstellar journey in a week.

All right, I wasn't being realistic; but I think everyone at the institute nourished the secret dream that his project would the one that caught Tallboy's imagination, occupied his time, and won his approval. Certainly the amount of work that went into preparation supported my idea.

The timing was tight but manageable. Jan would arrive at the institute at 0900, with the official parental assignment to take place at 0950. Tallboy's grand show-and-tell began at 1045 and went on for as long as he was willing to look and listen. Jan was scheduled to leave again at 1930, so I had mixed feelings about Tallboy's tour. The longer he stayed, the more impressed he was likely to be, and we wanted that. But we also wanted to spend time with Jan before she had to dash back to Luna for graduation and sign-out.

In the event, everything went off as well — and as badly — as it could have. At 0900 exactly Jan's ship docked at the institute. I was pleased to see that it was one of the new 5-G mini-versions of the McAndrew Drive, coming into use at last in the Inner System. My bet was that Jan had picked it just to please him. You don't need the drive at all for pond-hopping from Luna to L-4.

The parental assignment ceremony is traditionally conducted with a lot of formality. It was against custom to step out of the docking area as soon as the doors were opened, march up to the father-to-be, and grab him in a huge and affectionate hug. McAndrew looked startled for a moment, then swelled red as a turkey-cock with pleasure. I got the same shock treatment a few moments later. Then, instead of letting go, Jan and I held each other at arm's length and took stock.

She was going to be taller than me — already we were eye to eye. In three years she had changed from a super-smart child to an attractive woman, whose bright gray eyes told me something else; if I didn't take a hand, Jan would twist McAndrew round her little finger. And she knew I knew it. We stood smiling at each other, while a dozen messages passed between us: affection, pride, anticipation, sheer happiness — and challenge. Mac and I were getting a handful.

We gave each other a final hug,

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then she took my hand and Mac's and we went on through to meet with Limperis and the others. The official ceremony would not begin for another half hour, but we three knew that the important part was already completed.

"So what about your graduation present?" asked McAndrew, as we were waiting to begin. I had wondered about it myself. It was the first thing that most new children wanted to talk about.

"Nothing expensive," said Jan. "I think it would be nice just to make a trip — I've seen too much of Luna." Her tone was casual, but the quick sideways look at me told another story.

"Is that all?" said Mac. "Och, that doesn't sound like much of a present. We thought you'd be wanting a cruise pod, at the very least."

"What sort of trip?" I asked.

"I'd like to visit Triton Station. I've heard about it all my life, but apart from you, Jeanie, I don't know of anyone who's ever been there. And you never talk about it."

"I don't think that's a good idea at all," I said. The words popped out before I could stop them.

"Why not?"

"It's too far out — too isolated. And there'll be nothing at all for you to do there. It's a long way away." I had reacted before I had rational arguments, and now I was waffling.

Jan knew it. "A long way away! When the two of you have been light-years out. You've been on trips thousands of times as far as Triton Station."

I hesitated and she bore in again. "You're the one who told me that most people stick around like moles in their own backyards, when the Halo's waiting for them and there's a whole universe to be explored."

What could I say? That there was one rule for most people, and another for my daughter? Triton Station *is* in the backyard, in terms of interstellar space; but it's also out near the edge of the old Solar System, too far away for Inner System comforts. An excellent place for a message relay between the Halo and the Inner System, that's why it was put there in the first place. But it's small and spartan. And the station isn't down on Neptune's satellite, the way that most people think. It's in orbit around Triton, with just a small manned outpost on the surface of the satellite itself for supplies, raw materials, and cryogenic research. There are a few unmanned stations bobbing about in the icy atmosphere of Neptune itself, 350,000 kilometers away, but nobody in his right mind ever goes to visit them.

The sixty station personnel are a strange mixture of dedicated researchers and psychological loners who find the Inner System and even the Titan Colony much too crowded for them. Some of them love it there, but as soon as the 100-G balanced drive is in general use, Triton Station will be only a

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day-and-a-half flight away and well within reach of a weekend vacation. Then I suppose the disgusted staff will curse the crowds, and move farther out into the Halo itself seeking their old peace and quiet.

"You'll be bored," I said, trying another argument. "They're more antisocial than you can imagine, and you won't know anybody there."

"Yes, I will. I know Sven Wicklund, and we always got along famously. He's still there, isn't he?"

"He is, blast him," said McAndrew. "But as to what he's been up to out there for the past six months...."

His voice tailed away and the old slack-jawed, half-witted look crept over his face, the expression that meant that he was thinking hard. He was rubbing his fingers gently along his sandy, receding hairline, and I realized where his thoughts were taking him.

"Don't be silly, Mac. I hope you're not even considering it. If Wicklund won't tell *you* what he's doing, you don't imagine he'll talk to Jan about it, do you, if she's just at Triton Station for a short visit?"

"Well, I don't know," began McAndrew. "It seems to me there's a *chance*—"

"I feel sure he'll tell me," said Jan calmly.

Unfortunately, so was I. Wicklund had been bowled over by Jan when she was only fourteen and didn't have a tenth of her present firepower. If she could lead him around then with a ring through his nose, today with her added wiles it would be no contest.

"Let's not try to decide this now," I said. "The ceremony's already starting late, and then we have to get ready to meet Tallboy. Let's talk about it afterward."

"Oh, I think we can decide it easily enough now," said McAndrew.

"No, that's all right," said Jan. "It can wait. No hurry."

Sorry, Jeanie, said her smile at me. *Game, set, and match.*

After that I found it hard to keep my mind on Tallboy's visit. Luckily I wasn't on center stage most of the time, though I did tag along with the tour, watching that high forehead nodding politely, and his long index finger pointing at the different pieces of equipment on display. I also had a chance to talk to everyone when they completed their individual briefings.

"Impressive," said Gowers when she came out. She had been first one up, describing her theories and experiments on the focusing of light using arrays of kernels. A tough area of work. To set up a stable array of Kerr-Newman black holes called for solutions to the many-body problem in general relativity. Luckily there was no one in the System better able to tackle that — Emma Gowers had made a permanent niche for herself in scientific history years before, when she provided the exact solution to the general relativistic two-body problem.

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Now to test her approximations she had built a tiny array of shielded kernels, small enough that all her work was done through a microscope. I had seen Tallboy peering in through the eyepiece, joking with Emma as he did so.

"So he seems sympathetic?" I said.

"More than that." She took a deep breath and sat down. She was still hyper after her presentation. "I think it went very well. He listened hard and he asked questions. I was only scheduled for ten minutes, and we took nearly twenty. Keep your fingers crossed."

I did, as one by one the others went in. When they came out most of them echoed her optimism. Siclaro was the only questioning voice. He had described his system for kernel energy extraction, and Tallboy had given him the same attentive audience and nodded understandingly.

"But he asked me what I meant by 'spin-up,' " Siclaro said to me as we stood together outside the main auditorium.

"That's fair enough — you can't expect him to be a specialist on this stuff."

"I know that." He shook his head in a worried fashion. "But that came at the *end* of the presentation. And all the time I was talking, he was nodding his head at me as though he understood everything — ideas a lot more advanced than simple spin-up and spin-down of a Kerr black hole. But if he didn't know what I meant at the end, how could he have understood any of the rest of it?"

Before I had time to answer, my own turn had arrived. I came last of all, and though I had prepared as hard as anyone I was not a central part of the show. If Tallboy had to leave early I would be cut. If he had time, I was to show him over the *Hoatzin*, and make it clear to him that we were all ready for a long trip, as soon as his office gave us permission.

His energy level was amazing. He was still cordial and enthusiastic after eight and a half hours of briefing, with only one short food break. We took a pod, just the two of us, and zipped over to the *Hoatzin*. I gave him a ten-minute tour, showing how the living area was moved closer to the mass disk as the acceleration of the ship was increased, to provide a net 1-G environment for the crew. He asked numerous polite general questions: How many people could be accommodated in the ship? How old was it? Why was it called the inertialess drive? I boggled a little at the last one, because McAndrew had spent large parts of his life explaining impatiently to anyone who would listen that, damn it, it *wasn't* inertialess, that all it did was to balance off gravitational and inertial accelerations. But I went over it one more time, for Tallboy's benefit.

He listened closely, nodded that deep-browed head, and watched attentively as I moved a little closer to the

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mass disk, so that we could feel the net acceleration on us increase from one to 1½ Gs.

"One more question," he said at last. "And then we must return to the institute. You keep talking about *accelerations*, and making accelerations balance out. What does that have to do with us, with how heavy we *feel*?"

I stared at him. Was he joking? No, that fine-boned face was as serious as ever. He stood there politely waiting for my answer, and I felt that sinking feeling. I'm not sure what I told him, or what we talked about on the way back to the institute. I handed him on to McAndrew for a quick look at the Control Center, while I hurried off to find Limperis. The director was in his office, staring at a blank wall.

"I know, Jeanie," he said. "Don't tell me. I had to sit in on every briefing except yours."

"The man's an *idiot*," I said. "I think he means well, but he's a complete, boneheaded moron. He has no more idea than Wenig's pet monkey what goes on here in the institute."

"I know. I know." Limperis suddenly showed his age, and for the first time it occurred to me that he was approaching retirement. "I hoped at first that it was just my paranoia," he said. "I wondered if I were seeing something that wasn't there — some of the others were so impressed."

"How could they be? Tallboy had no idea what was going on!"

"It's his appearance. That sharp profile. He *looks* intelligent, so we assume he must be. But take the people here at the institute. Wenig looks like a mortician, Gowers could pass as a dumb-blonde hooker, and Siclaro reminds me of a gorilla. And each of them a mind in a million. We accept it that way round easily enough, but not in reverse."

He stood up slowly. "We're like babies out here, Jeanie; each of us with our own playthings. If anybody seems to be interested in what we're doing, and nods his head now and again, we *assume* he understands. At the institute, you interrupt if you don't follow an argument. But that's not the way Earthside government runs. Nod, and smile, and don't rock the boat — that's the name of the game, and it will take you a long way. You've seen how well it works for Dr. Tallboy."

"But if he doesn't understand a thing, what will his report say? The whole future of the institute depends on it."

"It does. And God knows what will happen. Did you know his degree is in *sociology* and he has no hard scientific training at all? I bet the real quality of our work won't make a scrap of difference to his decision. We've all wasted a week." He sighed. "Horseshit. Well, come on. Tallboy will be leaving in a few minutes. We must play it to the end and hope he leaves with a positive impression."

He was heading for the door with me when McAndrew hurried in.

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"I've been wondering where you two had gone," he said. "Tallboy's at the departure dock. What a show, eh? I told you we'd do it, we knocked him dead. Even without Wicklund's work, we showed more new results today than he'll have seen in the past ten years. Come on — he wants to thank us all for our efforts before he goes."

Mac went bounding away along the corridor, full of enthusiasm, oblivious to the atmosphere in Limperis's office. We followed slowly after him. For some reason we were both smiling.

"Don't knock it," said Limperis. "If Mac were a political animal he'd be that much less a scientist. He's not the man to present your budget request, but do you know what Einstein wrote to Born just before he died? 'Earning a living should have nothing to do with the search for knowledge.' "

"You should tell that to Mac."

"He was the one who told it to me."

There didn't seem much point in hurrying as we made our way to the departure dock. Tallboy had seen the best that we could offer. And who could tell? — perhaps McAndrew's enthusiam would be more persuasive than a thousand hours of unintelligible briefings.

The mills of bureaucracy may or may not grind fine, but they certainly grind exceedingly slow. Long before we had an official report from Tallboy's office, the argument over Jan's visit to Triton Station was over.

I had lost. She was on her way to Neptune. She had finagled a ride on a medium-acceleration supply ship, and anytime now we should have word of her arrival. And McAndrew couldn't wait — Wicklund was still frustratingly coy about his new work.

By a second one of those coincidences that McAndrew insisted were inevitable, Tallboy's pronunciamento on the future of the Penrose Institute zipped in to the Message Center at the same time as Jan's first message from Triton Station. I didn't know about her spacegram until later, but Limperis directed the Tallboy message for general institute broadcast. I was outside at the time, working near *Hoatzin*, and the news came as voice-only on my suit radio.

The summary: Siclaro's work on kernel energy extraction would proceed, and at a higher level (no surprise there, with the pressure from the Food and Energy Department for more compact power sources); Gowers would have her budget reduced by 40 percent, as would Macedo. They could continue, but with no new experimental work. McAndrew had his support chopped in half. And poor Wenig, it seemed, had fared the worst of all. The budget for compressed-matter research was down by 80 percent.

I wasn't worried about McAndrew. If they cut his research budget to zero, he would switch to straight theory and manage very well with just a pencil

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and paper. But everyone else would suffer.

And me? Tallboy wiped me out at the very end of the report, almost as an afterthought: experimental use of the *Hoatzin* was to be terminated completely, and the ship decommissioned. There would be no expedition to Alpha Centauri or anywhere else beyond the Halo. Worst of all, the report referred to "previous unauthorized use of the balanced drive, and high-risk treatment of official property" — a direct knock at me and McAndrew. We had enjoyed free use of the ship under the previous administration, but apparently Woolford had never thought to put it in writing.

I switched my suit to internal propulsion and headed back for the institute at top speed. McAndrew knew I was outside, and he met me at the lock waving a long printout sheet. His mop of sandy hair was straggling into his eyes, and a long streak of orange stickiness ran down the front of his shirt. I guessed he had been at dinner when the report came in.

"Did you see it?" he said.

"Heard it. I was on voice-only."

"Well? What do you think?"

"Horrible. But I'm not surprised. I knew he hadn't understood a thing."

"Eh?" He stood goggling at me. "Are you trying to be funny? It's the most exciting news in years. I knew she'd find out. What a lass!"

I may not be as smart as McAndrew, but I'm no fool. I can recognize a breakdown in communications when I see one. When Mac concentrates the world isn't there anymore. It seemed to me odds-on that he had been thinking of something else and hadn't registered the Tallboy decision.

"Mac, stand still for a minute" — he was jiggling up and down with excitement — "and listen to me. The report from External Affairs is here, on the future of your programs."

He grunted impatiently. "Aye, I know about it — I heard it come in." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "Never mind that now, it's not so important. *This* is what counts."

He shook the printout, stared at part of it, and went off into a trance. I finally reached out, removed it from his hand, and scanned the first few lines.

"It's from Jan!"

"Of course it is. She's on Triton Station. Do you realize what Wicklund's done out there?"

With Mac in this kind of mood, I'd never get his mind onto Tallboy. "No. What has he done?"

"He's solved it." He grabbed the spacegram back from me. "See, it's right here, can't you read? Jan didn't get the details, but she makes it clear enough. Wicklund has solved Vandell's Fifth Problem."

"Has he really?" I gently took the paper back from him. If it was news from Jan, I wanted to read it in full. "That's wonderful. It only leaves one question."

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He frowned at me. "Many questions — we'll have to wait for more details. But which one are you thinking of?"

"Nothing you can't answer. But what in heaven is Vandell's Fifth Problem?"

He stared at me in disgust.

I got an answer — eventually. But before I had all of it, we had been on a rambling tour of three hundred years of mathematics and physics.

"In the year 1900," he began.

"Mac!"

"No, listen to me. It's the right place to begin."

In the year 1900, at the second International Congress of Mathematicians in Paris, David Hilbert proposed a series of twenty-three problems to challenge the coming century. He was the greatest mathematician of his day, and his problems drew from a wide range of topics — topology, number theory, transfinite sets, and the foundations of mathematics itself. Each problem was important, and each was tough. Some were solved early in the century, others were shown to be undecidable, a few hung on for many decades; but by the year 2000 most of them had been wrapped up to everyone's reasonable satisfaction.

In the year 2000, the South African astronomer and physicist Dirk Vandell had followed Hilbert's precedent, and posed a series of twenty-one problems in astronomy and cosmology. Like Hilbert's problems they covered a wide range of topics, theoretical and observational, and every one was a skull-cruncher.

McAndrew had solved Vandell's Eleventh Problem when he was a very young man. From that work had emerged the whole theory for the existence and location of the kernel ring, the torus of Kerr-Newman black holes that circle the Sun ten times as far out as Pluto. Nine years later, Wenig's partial solution of the Fourteenth Problem had given McAndrew the clue that led him to the vacuum-energy drive. Now, assuming that Jan's report was correct, the Fifth Problem had fallen to Wicklund's analysis.

"But why is it so important?" I asked McAndrew. "The way you describe it, I don't see practical uses. It's just a way of amplifying an observed signal without amplifying background noise — and it only applies when the original signal is minute."

He shook his head in vigorous disagreement. "It has a thousand applications. Vandell already proposed one when he first set the problem, and I'm sure Wicklund will tackle it as soon as his experimental equipment is working. He'll use the techniques to look for solitaries — the rogue planets."

Rogue planets.

With those last two words, McAndrew brought the explanation along to the point where it made sense to me. I could draw on my own formal training in classical celestial mechanics.

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The possible existence of rogues went back a long way, farther than 1900. Probably all the way to Lagrange, who in his analysis of the three-body problem set up a mathematical framework to look at the motion of a planet moving in the gravitational fields of a binary star system. By 1880, that case was known to be "stable against ejection." In other words, the planet could have close approaches to each of the stars, and might suffer extremes of temperature, but it would never be completely expelled from the stellar system.

But suppose you have a system with three or more stars in it? That's not at all uncommon. Then the situation changes completely. A planet can pick up enough energy through a set of gravitational swing-bys past the stellar components to hurl it right out of the system. Once this happened it would become a sunless world, traveling alone through the void. Even if it later encountered another star, the chance of capture was minute. The planet would be a solitary, a rogue-world. Astronomers had speculated for centuries about the existence and possible numbers of such planets, but without a scrap of observational evidence.

Vandell had defined the problem: *An Earth-sized planet shines only by reflected light. If it gives off radiation in the thermal infrared or microwave regions, the signal is swamped by the stellar background. Devise a technique that will permit the detection of a rogue planet as small as the Earth.*

Now it seemed that Wicklund had done it, and McAndrew was happy as a pig, while everybody else at the institute gloomed about in reaction to Tallboy's effects on their work.

I sympathized with them. Rogue planets are fine, but I could see no way in which they could make any practical difference to me. Mac and Sven Wicklund could have my share of them. I spent a lot of time over on the *Hoatzin*, wondering what to do next. I didn't belong at the Penrose Institute; the only thing I offered there was the ability to pilot the long trips out. Once that was over, I might as well go back to the Titan run.

Jan's next message back gave me mixed feelings, but at least it cheered me up.

"Not much to do out here," she wrote — she was the only person I have ever met who could *chat* a spacegram. "You were right, Jeanie. Wicklund's as bad as McAndrew, totally wrapped up in the work he's doing and won't take much notice of me. And the rest of them hate company so much they run and hide when we meet in the corridors. I've been spending a lot of time over on *Merganser*. I got the impression from you that she's an old hulk, but she's not. She may be an antique, but everything's still in good working shape. I've even been spinning-up the drive. If I can talk Wicklund into it maybe we can go off

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on a little bit of a trip together. He needs a rest (from physics!)."

That brought back some exciting memories. *Merganser* was one of the two original prototypes of the balanced drive, and McAndrew and I had ironed the bugs out of her personally. She was limited to a 50-G acceleration, but still in good working order. I'd fly her anywhere. Mac seemed much less happy when he read the letter.

"I hope she knows what she's doing," he said. "That ship's not a toy. Do you think it's safe?"

"Safe as anything in the System. Jan won't have any trouble. We used *Merganser* for training before they mothballed her, don't you remember?"

He didn't, of course. He carries physics and mathematics in his head at an astonishing level of detail, but useful everyday information is another matter. He nodded at me vaguely, and wandered off to send more messages to Wicklund (who had, to date, provided no replies).

We heard from Jan again, just as the explicit order was coming in from Tallboy's office to decommission *Hoatzin* and remove the supplies for the Alpha Centauri mission.

I screwed up Tallboy's order into a tight ball and threw it across the room. Then I sat down to read what Jan had to say.

No preamble this time: "Wicklund says it works! He's already found three rogues, and expects a lot more. They must be a lot more common than anybody thought. Now sit back for the big news: *there's one only a light-year away!* Isn't it exciting?"

Well, maybe — less so to me than to Mac, I was sure of that. I assumed that solitary planets would be rather rare, so one closer than the nearest star was a bit surprising. But it was her next words that shot me bolt upright and sent a tingle through my spine.

"*Merganser* is working perfectly now, all ready for a trip. I've persuaded Wicklund to take her out for a look at Vandell — that's what he wants to name the planet. I'm sure you don't approve, so I won't ask. Lots of love — see you when we get back."

Even as I screamed inside, I wasn't completely surprised. She was McAndrew's daughter, all right — it was exactly the harebrained sort of thing he would have done.

Mac and I both played it very cool. That boneheaded pair, we said to each other. We might have guessed it, the follies of youth. They'll be in trouble when they get back, even though *Merganser* is an old ship that Triton Station can do what they like with.

But deep inside I had different feelings. Wicklund had sent the coordinates of Vandell to us before they left, and, as Jan said, it was close, less than a light-year and a quarter away. Easily in *Merganser*'s range, and a lure that any scientist worth his salt would find hard to resist, even without Jan's coax-

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ing. Where had it come from, what was it made of, how long since it had been ejected from its parent star? — there were a hundred questions that could never be answered by remote observations, not even with the super-sensitive methods that Wicklund had developed.

But it was those same questions that made me so uneasy. If I've learned one thing wandering around inside and outside the Solar System, it's this: Nature has more ways of killing you than you can imagine. When you think you've learned them all, another one pops up to teach you humility. If you're lucky, that is. If not, someone else will have to decide what did you in.

For a week after Jan's message I monitored the messages closely that came in from the outer relay stations. And every day I would ride over to *Hoatzin* and potter about there. I was supposed to be working on the decommissioning, but instead I would sit alone in the pilot's chair, check all the status flags, and think my own thoughts. Until finally, ten days after Jan and Wicklund had left, I went over to visit *Hoatzin* late one sleep period.

And found that the lock had been cycled since I left.

McAndrew was sitting in the pilot's chair, staring at the controls. I came quietly up behind him, patted him on the shoulder, and slipped into the co-pilot's seat. He turned toward me, straggly eyebrows raised.

"What about Tallboy?" he said at last. "What will he do to the institute?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. Not if we make it clear that it's our fault."

I reached out and called for a destination reading. When I left, the co-ordinates had all been set to zero. Now they carried precise values.

"I was just playing around," said McAndrew sheepishly.

"Sure you were." I stood up. "I checked the experimental logs in your lab today, and they were all current to this afternoon — and you're always months behind. You're a bastard, Mac. You would have headed off without me. Now, move over — you're sitting in my chair."

He stood up, rubbing at the back of his head the way he always did when he was embarrassed. "Och, Jeanine," he said. But he was smiling to himself as we changed seats.

The calculations were elementary, and I could do them as well as he could. *Merganser* would be out to the rogue planet in about sixty days of shipboard time, but that would pick up only ten days of inertial time. We would reach Vandell a couple of days after them. For me, that was two days too late.

Our drive wake left an ionization track across the whole width of the Solar System. Mac checked that there were no ships directly behind for us to burn a hole through, and while he was doing it I had a new idea and sent a message back to External Affairs. I said

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that we were about to perform a final and short high-G test of *Hoatzin*'s drive before we took her in and decommissioned her. With luck, Tallboy's group would assume we had been the unhappy victims of a nasty accident, shooting out of the Solar System on a one-way journey when some control element of the drive unit had failed. Limperis and friends at the institute wouldn't believe that, not as soon as they checked our destination coordinates — but they would never tell their suspicions to Tallboy. Maybe they could even get some mileage from our disappearance, pointing out the need for more funds for reliability and system maintenance. Limperis could play that game with his eyes closed.

Perhaps everything would work out fine — unless McAndrew and I came back. Then the truth would come out, and we'd be roasted for sure.

Neither of us could get too worried about that possibility. We had other things on our minds. As we raced out along the invisible scintillation of *Merganser*'s drive, Mac pumped the data bank for information about Vandell's rogueworld. He didn't get much. We had coordinates relative to the Sun, and velocity components, but all they did was make sure we could find our way to the planet. Wicklund had been able to put an upper limit on its diameter using long-base-line interferometry, and estimated that we were dealing with a body no bigger than Earth. But we were missing the physical variables — no mass, internal structure, temperature, magnetic field, or physical composition, not even an estimate of rotation rate. Mac fumed, but at least I'd have a lot more information for him as soon as we got close. In the week before we left the institute, I had put on board the *Hoatzin* every instrument that wasn't nailed down, anything that might tell us something useful about Vandell without having to go down there and set foot on its surface.

(Yes, I know I had accused Mac of being ready to leave without me. Nothing unfair about that — he would have done it, just as I would have left without him if there had been no other alternative. We would both have understood. Some things don't need discussion.)

At a 100-G acceleration you head out of the Solar System on a trajectory that's very close to a straight line. The gravitational accelerations produced by the Sun and planets are negligible by comparison, even in the Inner System. We were bee-lining for a point in the constellation Lupus, the Wolf, where Vandell lay close in apparent position to an ancient supernova fragment. Its explosion had lit up the skies of Earth more than a thousand years ago, back in A.D. 1006.; an interesting object, but we wouldn't be going even a thousandth of the way out to it. Wicklund was right, in interstellar terms Vandell's rogueworld sat in Sol's backyard.

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Without a complicated trajectory to worry about, I went round and round with a different problem. When the drives were on, both *Merganser* and *Hoatzin* were blind to incoming messages, and drowned out any of their own transmissions. Thus we had a chance to get a message to Sven Wicklund and Jan only when their drive was turned off, while they were coasting free to rubberneck or study the starscope scenery from a slightly different point of view. Even though they might not be listening for an incoming signal when the drive was off, their computer certainly would be, and it would notify them of anything important.

But now see my problem: to send a message, we had to switch our drive off, and that would delay our arrival a little bit every time we did it. Our signal would then take days or week to reach *Merganser* — and to receive it, their ship had to have its drive off at just the right time. DON'T LAND was all I wanted to say. But how would I know when to switch off our drive and send an urgent message, so it would get to them just when *their* drive was not operating?

I wrestled with that until my brains began to boil, then handed it over to McAndrew. He pointed out that we had knowledge of the occasions when their drive had been switched off, from the gaps in their drive wake. So making a best prediction was a straightforward problem in stochastic optimization. He solved it, too, before we had been on our way for a week. But the solution predicted such a low probability of successful contact that I didn't even try it — better to leave our drive on full blast, and try to make up some of their lead.

With shields on to protect us from the sleet of particles and hard radiation induced by our light-chasing velocity, we had no sense of motion at all. But we were really moving. At turnover point we were within one part in ten thousand of light speed.

If I haven't said it already, I'll say it now: the 100-G balanced drive is nice to have, but it's a son of a bitch — you travel a light-year in just over a month of shipboard time. Two months, and you've gone fifty light-years. Four shipboard months, and you're outside the Galaxy and well on your way to Andromeda.

I calculated that two hundred days would put you at the edge of the Universe, 18 billion light-years out and no chance of finding your way back to your starting point. Soon after that, according to McAndrew, you'd begin to have effects on the large-scale structure of space-time. The vacuum zero point energy tapped by the drive isn't inexhaustible; and as to what would happen if you kept on going....

An academic question, of course, as Mac pointed out. Long before that the mass plate would be inadequate to protect the drive, and the whole structure would disintegrate through ab-

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lative collision with intergalactic gas and dust. Very reassuring; but Mac's intrigued and speculative tone when he discussed the possibility was enough to send shivers up my spine.

The position fixes we needed to refine Wicklund's original position and velocity for Vandell rendezvous were made by our computer during the final three days of flight. Those observations and calibrations were performed in microsecond flashes while the drive was turned off, and at the same time we sent out burst mode messages, prepared and compressed in advance, to *Merganser*'s projected position. We told them when to send a return signal to us, but no countermessages came in. There was nothing but the automatic "Signal received" from their shipboard computer.

One day before rendezvous we were close enough to throttle back the drive. We couldn't see Vandell or *Merganser* yet, but the ships' computers could begin talking to each other. It took them only a few seconds to collect the information I was interested in, and spit out a display summary:

No human presence now on board. Transfer pod in use for planetary descent trajectory. No incoming signals from pod.

I keyed in the only query that mattered: When descent?

Seven hours shipboard time.

That was it. We had arrived just too late. By now Jan and Sven Wicklund would be down on the surface of Vandell. Then another part of the first message hit me. *No incoming signals from pod.*

"Mac!" I said. "No pod signal."

He nodded grimly. He had caught it, too. Even when they were down on the surface, there should be an automatic beacon signal to fix the pod's position and allow compensation for Doppler shift of communication frequency.

"No pod signal," I said again. "That means they're—"

"Aya." His voice was husky, as though there were no air in his lungs. "Let's not jump to conclusions, Jeanie. For all we know...."

But he didn't finish the sentence. The pod antenna was robust. Only something major (such as impact with a solid surface at a few hundred meters a second) would put it out of action. I had never known a case where the pod's comlink died and the persons within the pod lived.

We sat side by side in a frozen, empty silence as *Hoatzin* brought us closer to the rogue planet. Soon it was visible to our highest-resolution telescopes. Without making a decision at any conscious level, I automatically set up a command sequence that would free our own landing pod as soon as the drive went off completely. Then I simply sat there, staring ahead at Vandell.

For much of our trip out I had tried to visualize what a planet would be like that had known no warming sun

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for millions or billions of years. It had floated free — for how long? We didn't know. Perhaps since our kind had descended from the trees, perhaps as long as any life had existed on Earth. For all that time, the planet had moved on through the quiet void, responsive only to the gentle, persistent tug of galactic gravitational and magnetic fields, drifting along where the stars were no more than distant pinpricks against the black sky. With no sunlight to breathe life onto its surface, Vandell would be cold, airless, the frozen innermost circle of hell. It chilled me to think of it.

The planet grew steadily in the forward screens. As the definition of the display improved, I suddenly realized why I couldn't relate the picture in front of me to my mental images. Vandell was *visible*, at optical wavelengths. It sat there at the center of the screen, a small sphere that glowed a soft, living pink against the stellar backdrop. As I watched, the surface seemed to shimmer, with an evanescent pattern of fine lines running across it.

McAndrew had seen it, too. He gave a grunt of surprise, cupped his chin in his hands, and leaned forward. After two minutes of silence he reached across to the terminal and keyed in a brief query.

"What are you doing?" I asked, when after another two minutes he showed no sign of speaking.

"Want to see what's in *Merganser*'s memory. Should be some images from their time of first approach." He grunted and shook his head. "Look at that screen. There's no way Vandell can look like that."

"I was amazed to *see* it at visible wavelengths. But I'm not sure why."

"Available energy." He shrugged, but his gaze never left the display. "See, Jeanie, the only thing that can provide energy to that planet's surface is an internal source. But nothing I've ever heard of could give this much radiation at those frequencies, and sustain it over a long period. And look at the edge of the planet's disk. See, it's less bright. That's an atmospheric limb darkening, if ever I've seen one — an atmosphere, now, on a planet that should be as cold as space. Doesn't make any sense at all. No sense at all."

We watched together as *Merganser*'s data bank fed across to our ship's computer and through the displays. The screen to our left flickered through a wild pattern of colors, then went totally dark. McAndrew looked at it and swore to himself.

"Explain that to me, Jeanie. There's the way that Vandell looked in the visible part of the spectrum when Jan and Sven were on their final appproach — black as hell, totally invisible. We get here, a couple of days later, and we find *that*." He waved his arm at the central display, where Vandell was steadily increasing in size as we moved closer. "Look at the readings that Wicklund made as they came into parking orbit — no visible emissions, no thermal emissions, no sign of an at-

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mosphere. Now see our readings: the planet is visible, above freezing point, and covered in clouds. It's as though they were describing one world, and we've arrived at a completely different one."

Mac often tells me that I have no imagination. But as he spoke wild ideas went running through my mind that I didn't care to mention. A planet that changed its appearance when humans approached it; a world that waited patiently for millions of years, then draped a cloak of atmosphere around itself as soon as it had lured a group of people to its surface. Could the changes on Vandell be interpreted as the result of *intention*, a deliberate and intelligent act on the part of something on the planet?

While I was still full of my furious fancies, a high-pitched whistle from the navigation console announced that the balanced drive had turned off completely. We had reached our rendezvous position, two hundred thousand kilometers from Vandell. I was moving away from the control panel, heading toward our own transfer pod, before the sound had ended. At the entrance I stopped and turned, expecting that McAndrew would be close on my heels. But he hadn't left the displays. Something there was holding him rigid.

"Hey! Mac!"

He turned, shook his head from side to side as though to banish his own version of the insane ideas that had crowded my mind when I saw saw the change in Vandell, and slowly followed me to the pod. At the entrance he paused for a last look at the screens.

There was no discussion of our move into the pod. We didn't know when, or even quite how, but we both knew that we had to make a descent to the surface of Vandell. Somehow we had to recover the bodies that lay beneath the flickering, pearly cloud shrouding the rogueworld.

In another time and place, the view from the pod would have been beautiful. We were close enough now to explain the rosy shimmer. It was lightning storms, running back and forth across the clouded skies of Vandell. Lightning storms that shouldn't be there, on a world that ought to be dead. We had drained *Merganser*'s data banks as we went round and round in low orbit. Not much new had come to light, but we had found the last set of instrument readings returned to the main computer when the other landing pod had made its approach to Vandell's surface: *Atmospheric pressure: zero. Magnetic field: negligible. Temperature: 4° absolute. Surface gravity: 0.4/G. Planetary rotation rate: too small to measure.*

Then their pod had touched down, with final relative velocity of only half a meter a second — and all transmissions had ceased, instantly. Whatever had killed Jan and Sven Wicklund, di-

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rect impact with the surface couldn't be the culprit.

Our instruments had added a few new (and odd) facts to that earlier picture. The "atmosphere" we were seeing now was mainly dust, a great swirling storm across the whole of Vandell, littered by lightning flashes through the upper part. It was hot, a furnace breath that had no right to exist. Vandell was supposed to be *cold*. Goddammit, it should be drained of every last calorie of heat. McAndrew had told me so, there was no way the planet could be warm.

Round and round, orbit after orbit; we went on until I felt that we were a fixed center and the whole universe was gyrating around us, while I stared at that black vortex (it came and went from one orbit to the next; now you see it, now you don't) and McAndrew sat glued to the data displays. I don't think he looked at Vandell itself for more than ten seconds in five hours. He was thinking.

And me? The pressure inside was growing — tearing me apart. According to Limperis and Wenig, I'm cautious to a fault. Where angels fear to tread, I not only won't rush in, I don't want to go near the place. That's one reason they like to have me around, to exercise my high cowardice quotient. But now I wanted to fire our retrorockets and get down there, down onto Vandell. Twice I had seated myself at the controls, and fingered the preliminary descent sequence (second nature, I could have done that in my sleep). And twice McAndrew had emerged from his reverie, shook his head, and spoken: "No, Jeanie."

But the third time he didn't stop me.

"D'ye know where you're going to put her down, Jeanie?" was all he said.

"Roughly." I didn't like the sound of my voice at all. Too scratchy and husky. "I've got the approximate landing position from *Merganser*'s readings."

"Not there." He was shaking his head. "Not quite there. See it, the black tube? Put us down the middle of that funnel — can you do it?"

"I can. But if it's what it looks like, we'll get heavy turbulence."

"Aye, I'll agree with that." He shrugged. "That's where they are, though, for a bet. Can you do it?"

That wasn't his real question. As he was speaking, I began to slide us in along a smooth descent trajectory. There was nothing to the calculation of our motion, we both recognized that. Given our desired touchdown location, the pod's computer would have a minimum fuel descent figured in fractions of a second.

I know McAndrew very well. What he was saying — not in words, that wasn't his style — was simple: *It's going to be dangerous, and I'm not sure how dangerous. Do you want to do it?*

I began to see why as soon as we were inside the atmosphere. Visibility

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went down to zero. We were descending through thick smokelike dust and flickering lightning. I switched to radar vision, and found I was looking down to a murky, surrealistic world, with a shattered, twisted surface. Heavy winds (*without an atmosphere? — what were winds?*) moved us violently from side to side, up and down, with sickening free-fall drops arrested by the drive as soon as they were started.

Thirty seconds to contact, and below us the ground heaved and rolled like a sick giant. Down and down, along the exact center of the black funnel. The pod shook and shivered around us. The automatic controls seemed to be doing poorly, but I knew I'd be worse — my reaction times were a thousandfold too slow to compete. All we could do was hold tight and wait for the collision.

Which never came. We didn't make a featherbed landing, but the final jolt was just a few centimeters a second. Or was it more? I couldn't say. It was lost in the continuing shuddering movements of the ground that the pod rested on. The planet beneath us was alive. I stood up, then had to hold onto the edge of the control desk to keep my feet. I smiled at McAndrew (quite an effort) as he began an unsteady movement toward the equipment locker.

He nodded at me. *Earthquake country.*

I nodded back. *Where is their ship?*

We had landed on a planet almost as big as Earth, in the middle of a howling dust storm that reduced visibility to less than a hundred yards. Now we were proposing to search an area of a couple of hundred million square miles — for an object a few meters across. The needle in a haystack had nothing on this. Mac didn't seem worried. He was putting on an external support pack — we had donned suits during the first phase of descent.

"Mac!"

He paused with the pack held against his chest and the connectors held in one hand. "Don't be daft, Jeanie. Only one of us should be out there."

And that made me mad. He was being logical (my specialty). But to come more than a light-year, and then *one* of us go the last few miles.... Jan was my daughter, too — my only daughter. I moved forward and picked up another of the packs. After one look at my face, Mac didn't argue.

At least we had enough sense not to venture outside at once. Suited up, we completed the systematic scan of our surroundings. The visual wavelengths were useless — we couldn't see a thing through the ports — but the microwave sensors let us look to the horizon. And a wild horizon it was. Spikes of sharp rock sat next to crumbling mesas, impenetrable crevasses, and tilted blocks of dark stone, randomly strewn across the landscape.

I could see no pattern at all, no rule of formation. But over to one side, less than a mile from our pod, our instru-

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ments were picking up a bright radar echo, a reflection peak stronger than anything that came from the rocky surface. It must be metal — could only be metal — could only be Jan's ship. But was it intact? Lightning-fused? A scoured hulk? A shattered remnant, open to dust and vacuum?

My thoughts came too fast to follow. Before they had reached any conclusion we had moved to the lock, opened it, and were standing on the broken surface of Vandell. McAndrew automatically fell behind to let me take the lead. Neither of us had any experience with this type of terrain, but he knew my antennae for trouble were better than his. I tuned my suit to the reflected radar signal from our pod and we began to pick our way carefully forward.

It was a grim, tortuous progress. There was no direct path that could be taken across the rocks. Every tenth step seemed to bring me to a dead end, a place where we had to retrace our steps halfway back to our own pod. Beneath our feet, the surface of the planet shivered and groaned, as though it were ready to open up and swallow us. The landscape as our suits presented it to us was a scintillating nightmare of blacks and grays. (Vision in nonvisible wavelengths is always disconcerting — microwave more than most.)

Around us, the swirling dust came in shivering waves that whispered along the outside of our helmets. I could detect a definite cycle, with a peak every seven minutes or so. Radio static followed the same period, rising and falling in volume to match the disturbance outside.

I had tuned my set to maximum gain and was transmitting a continuous call signal. Nothing came back from the bright radar blip of the other pod. It was now only a couple of hundred yards ahead, but we were approaching agonizingly slowly.

At fifty yards I noticed a lull in the rustle around us. I switched to visible wavelengths, and waited impatiently while the suit's processor searched for the best combination of frequencies to penetrate the murk. After a half a second the internal suit display announced that there would be a short delay; the sensors were covered with ionized dust particles that would have to be repelled. That took another ten seconds, then I had an image. Peering ahead on visible wavelengths, I thought I could see a new shape in front of us, a flat oval hugging the dark ground.

"Visible signal, Mac," I said over the radio. "Tell your suit."

That was all I could say. I know the profile of a pod, I've seen them from every angle. And the silhouette ahead of us looked *wrong*. It had a twisted, sideways cant, bulging toward the left. I increased pace, stumbling dangerously along smooth slabs and around jagged pinnacles, striding recklessly across a quivering deep abyss. Mac

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was following if I got in trouble — unless he was taking worse risks himself. I could hear his breath, loud on the suit radio.

It was their pod. No doubt at all. And as I came closer I could see the long, gaping hole in one side. It takes a lot to smash a transfer pod beyond repair, but that one would never fly again. Inside, it would be airless, lifeless, filled only with the choking dust that was Vandell's only claim to an atmosphere.

And the people inside? Would Jan or Sven have thought to wear suits before descent? It would make a difference only to the appearance of the corpses. Even with suits, anything that could kill their signal beacon would kill them, too.

I took my final step to the pod, stooped to peer in through the split in the side, and stopped breathing. Somewhere deep inside me, contrary to all logic, there still lived a faint ghost of hope. It died as I looked. Two figures lay side by side on the floor of the pod, neither of them moving.

I groaned, saw Mac coming to stand beside me, and switched on my helmet light for a bright view of the interior. Then I straightened up so fast that my head banged hard on the pod's tough metal.

They were both wearing suits, their helmets were touching — and as the light from outside penetrated the interior of the pod, they swung around in unison to face me. They were both rubbing at their suit faceplates with gloved hands, clearing a space in a thick layer of white dust there.

"Jan!" My shout must have blasted Mac rigid. "Sven! Mac, they're alive!"

"Christ, Jeanie, I see that. Steady on, you'll burst my eardrums." He sounded as though he were going to burst himself, from sheer pleasure and relief.

We scrambled around to the main hatch of the pod and I tried to yank it open. It wouldn't move. Mac lent a hand, and still nothing would budge — everything was too bent and battered. Back we went back to the hole in the ship's side, and found them trying to enlarge it enough to get out.

"Stand back," I said. "Mac and I can cut that in a minute."

Then I realized they couldn't hear me or see me. Their faceplates were covered again with dust, and they kept leaning together to touch helmets.

"Mac! There's something wrong with their suits."

"Of course there is." He sounded disgusted with my stupidity. "Radios not working — we already knew that. They're communicating with each other by direct speech through the helmet contact. Vision units are done for, too — see, all they have are the faceplates, and the dust sticks and covers them unless they keep on clearing it. The whole atmosphere of this damned planet is nothing more than charged dust particles. Our suits are repelling them, or we'd see nothing at visible

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wavelengths. Here, let me in there."

He stuck his head through the opening, grabbed the arm of Jan's suit, and pulled us so that we were all four touching helmets. We could talk to each other.

And for the first ten minutes that's what we did: talk, in a language that defies all logical analysis. I would call it the language of love, but that phrase has been used too often for another (and less powerful) emotional experience.

Then we enlarged the hole so they could climb out. At that point I thought that we had won, that our troubles and difficulties were all over. In fact, they were just starting.

Their pod was in even worse shape than it looked. The battering from flying boulders that had ruined the hull should have left intact the internal electronics, computers, and communications links, components with no moving parts that ought to withstand any amount of shaking and violent motion. But they were all dead. The pod was nothing but a lifeless chunk of metal and plastics. Worse still, all the computer systems in Jan and Sven's suits had failed, too. They had no radios, no external-vision systems — not even temperature controls. Only the purely mechanical components, like air supply and suit pressure, were still working.

I couldn't imagine anything that could destroy the equipment so completely and leave Jan and Sven alive, but those questions would have to come later. For the moment our first priority was the return to the other pod. If I had thought it dangerous work coming, going back would be much worse. Jan and Sven were almost blind, they couldn't step across chasms or walk along a thin slab of rock. Without radios, I couldn't even tell them to back up if I decided we had to retrace part of our path.

We all four linked hands, to make a chain with Mac on the left-hand end and me on the right, and began a strange crablike movement back in the direction of the other pod. I dared not hurry, and it took hours. Four times I had to stop completely, while the ground beneath us went through exceptionally violent paroxyms of shaking and shuddering. We stood motionless, tightly gripping each other's gloved hands. If it was scary for me, it must have been hell for Jan and Sven. Mac and I were their lifeline; if we lost contact, they wouldn't make twenty meters safely across the broken surface. While the shaking went on, I was picking up faint sounds in my radio. McAndrew and Wicklund had their helmets together, and Wicklund seemed to be doing all the talking. For five minutes I heard only occasional grunts from Mac through his throat mike.

"Right," he said at last. "Were you able to pick up any of that, Jeanie? We have to get a move on. Go faster."

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"Faster? In these conditions? You're crazy. I know it's slow going, but we all have plenty of air. Let's do it right, and get there in one piece."

"It's not air I'm worried about." He was crowding up behind us, so that we were all bumping into each other. "We have to be in the pod and off the surface in less than an hour. Sven's been tracking the surges of seismic activity and dust speed, ever since they landed and everything went to hell. There's a bad one coming an hour and a half from now — and I mean *bad*. Worse than anything we've felt so far. A lot of the minor cycles we've been feeling since we came out on the surface will all be in phase. They'll all add together."

Worse than anything we had felt so far. What would it be like? It wasn't easy to imagine. Nor was the cause — but *something* had taken Vandell's smooth and quiet surface and crumpled it to a wild ruin in the few hours since the other pod had landed.

Against my instincts I began to take more risks, to climb over more jagged rocks and to walk along shelves that might tilt and slide under our weight. I think that at this point it was worse for McAndrew and me than for Sven and Jan. They could walk blind and trust us to keep them safe; but we had to keep our eyes wide open, and study all the dangers around us. I wanted to ask Mac a hundred questions, but I didn't dare to focus his attention or mine on anything except the immediate task.

At our faster pace we were within a hundred meters of the pod in twenty minutes, with what looked like a clear path the rest of the way. That was when I heard a grunt and curse over the suit radio, and turned to see McAndrew sliding away to one side down a long scree of loose gravel. Last across, he had pushed Sven Wicklund to safety as the surface began to break. He fell, scrabbled at the ground, but couldn't get hold of anything firm. He rolled once, then within seconds was lost from view behind a black jumble of boulders.

"Mac!" I was glad that Jan couldn't hear my voice crack with panic.

"I'm here, Jeanie. I'm all right." He sounded as though he were out on a picnic. "My own fault, I could see it was breaking away when Sven was on it. I should have looked for another path instead of following him like a sheep."

"Can you get back?"

There was silence, probably thirty seconds. In my nerved-up state it seemed like an hour. I could hear Mac's breath, faster and louder over the radio.

"I'm not sure," he said at last. "It's a mess down here, and the slope's too steep to climb straight up. Damned gravel, I slide right back down with it. It may take me a little while. You three had better keep going and I'll catch up later. Time's too short for you to hang around waiting."

"Forget it. Hold right there, I'm

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coming back after you." I leaned to set my helmet next to Jan's. "Jan, can you hear me?"

"Yes. But speak louder." Her voice was faint, as though she were many meters away.

"I want you and Sven to stand right here and don't move — not for anything. Mac's stuck, and I have to help him. I'll be just a few minutes."

That was meant to be reassuring, but then I wondered what would happen if I was too optimistic about how long it would take me. "Give me twenty minutes, and if we're not back then, you'll have to find the pod on your own. It's straight in front as you're facing now, about a hundred meters away. If you go in a straight line for fifty paces, then clear your faceplates, you should be able to see it."

I knew she must have questions, but there was no time to answer them. Mac's tone suggested it would be completely fatal to be on Vandell's surface, unprotected, when the next big wave of seismic activity hit us.

I knew exactly where Mac had gone, but I had a hard time seeing him. The rock slide had carried with it a mixture of small and large fragments, from gravel and pebbles to substantial boulders. His struggles to climb the slope had only managed to embed him deeper in loose materials. Now his suit was three-quarters hidden. His efforts also seemed to have carried him backward, so with a thirty-degree gradient facing him I didn't think he'd ever be able to get out alone. And farther down the slope lay a broad fissure in the surface, of indeterminate depth.

He was facing my way, and he had seen me, too. "Jeanie, don't come any closer. You'll slither right down here, the same as I did. There's nothing firm past the ledge you're standing on."

"Don't worry. This is as far as I'm coming." I backed up a step, nearer to a huge rock that must have weighed many tons, and turned my head so the chest of Mac's suit sat on the crosshairs at the exact center of my display. "Don't move a muscle now. I'm going to use the Walton, and we don't have time for second tries."

I lifted the crosshairs just a little to allow for the effects of gravity, then intoned the Walton release sequence. The ejection solenoid fired, and the thin filament with its terminal electromagnet shot out from the chest panel on my suit and flashed down toward McAndrew. The laser at the tip measured the distance of the target, and the magnet went on a fraction of a second before contact. Mac and I were joined by a hair-thin bond. I braced myself behind the big rock. "Ready? I'm going to haul you in."

"Aye, I'm ready. But why didn't I think of using the Walton? Damnation, I didn't need to get you back here, I could have done it for myself."

I began to reel in the line, slowly so that Mac could help by freeing himself from the stones and gravel. The Izaak Walton has been used for many years,

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ever since the first big space construction jobs pointed out the need for a way to move around in vacuum without wasting a suit's reaction mass. If all you want is a little linear momentum, the argument went, why not take it from the massive structures around you? That's all that the Waltons do. I'd used them hundreds of times in free fall, shooting the line out to a girder where I wanted to be, connecting, then reeling myself over there. So had Mac, and that's why he was disgusted with himself. But it occurred to me that this was the first time I'd ever heard of a Walton being used on a planetary surface.

"I don't think you could have done it, Mac," I said. "This big rock's the only solid one you could see from down there, and it doesn't look as though it has a high metal content. You'd have nothing for the magnet to grab hold of up here."

"Maybe." He snorted. "But I should have had the sense to *try*. I'm a witless oaf."

What that made me, I dreaded to think. I went on steadily hauling in the line until he had scrabbled his way to stand by my side, then switched off the field. The line and magnet automatically ran into their storage reel in my suit, and we carefully turned and headed back to the other two.

They were just where I had left them. They stood, helmets touching, like a frozen and forlorn tableau in Vandell's broken wilderness. It was more than fifteen minutes since I had gone back to Mac, and I could imagine their uneasy thoughts. I leaned my helmet to touch both theirs.

"All present and safe. Let's go."

Jan gave my arm a great squeeze. We formed our chain again, and crabbed the rest of the way to the pod. It wasn't quite as easy as it had looked, or as I had suggested to Jan, but in less than fifteen minutes we were opening the outer hatch and bundling Sven and Jan into it.

The lock was only big enough for two at a time. They were out of their useless suits by the time that McAndrew and I could join them inside. Jan looked pale and shaky, ten years older than her seventeen years. Sven Wicklund was as blond and dreamy-looking as ever, still impossibly young in appearance. Like McAndrew, his own internal preoccupations partly shielded him from unpleasant realities — even now he was brandishing a piece of paper covered with squiggles at us. But Jan and Sven had both held together, keeping their composure well when death must have seemed certain. It occurred to me that if you wanted to find a rite of passage to adulthood, you wouldn't find a tougher one than Jan had been through.

"Just look at this," Sven said as soon as we were out of the hatch. "I've been plotting the cycles—"

"How long before it hits?" I interrupted.

"Four minutes. But—"

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"Get into working suits, both of you." I was already at the controls. "I'm taking us up as soon as I can, but if we're too late I can't guarantee that the pod hull will survive. You know what happened to yours."

The ascent presented no problem of navigation — I had plenty of fuel, and I intended to go straight up with maximum lift. There would be time to worry about rendezvous with *Merganser* and *Hoatzin* when we were safely away from Vandell.

I believe in being careful, even on the simplest takeoff, so all my concentration was on the control sequences. I could hear Jan, McAndrew, and Wicklund babbling to each other in the background, until I told them to get off my suit frequency and let me think. Vandell was still a complete mystery world to me, but if the others had answers, those, like the problem of ship rendezvous, could wait until we were off the surface.

Wicklund's predictions for the timing of the next wave of violence proved to be unnecessary. I could see it coming directly, in the values provided by the pod's field instruments. Every guage reading in front of me was creeping up in unison as we lifted off; ionization levels, surface vibrations, dust density, electric and magnetic fields — readouts flickered rapidly higher, and needles turned steadily across their dials like the hands of an old-fashioned clock.

Something big was on its way. We lifted into a sky ripped by great lightning flashes, burning their way through the clouds of charged dust particles. The ascent we made was rapid. Within a few seconds we had reached three kilometers. And then, as I was beginning to relax a little and think that we had been just in time, the readings in front of me went mad. External field strengths flickered up so fast in value that the figures were unreadable, then warning lights came on. I heard the screech of a fatal overload in my suit's radio, and saw the displays in front of me blank out one after another. The computer, after a brief mad flurry of a binary dump across the control screen, went totally dead. Suddenly I was flying blind and deaf. All the electronic tools that every pilot relied on were now totally disabled.

It was useless information, but suddenly I understood exactly what had killed the signal beacon from Jan and Sven's pod without also killing them. Before the displays in front of me died, the electric and magnetic field strengths had risen to an impossible level. Even with partial shieldings from the pod's hull, their intensity was enough to wipe magnetic storage — that took care of computers, communications equipment, displays, and suit controls. If the suits hadn't been designed with manual overrides for certain essentials so that Jan and Sven could control their air supply, that would have been the end.

Now our pod had the same prob-

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lem as theirs. We hadn't been pelted with boulders, as they had when they were sitting on the surface of Vandell, but we had no computer control of our flight and we were being whipped around the sky by the changing magnetic fields.

It wasn't necessary for me to change to manual control. When the computer died, it dumped everything in my lap automatically. I gritted my teeth, tried to keep us heading straight up (not easy, the way we were being tilted and rocked) and refused to decrease thrust even though the pod shuddered as though it were getting ready to disintegrate.

I'm blessed with an iron stomach, one that doesn't get sick no matter how much lurching and spinning it takes. McAndrew isn't, and Jan takes after him. They couldn't communicate with me, but I could take their misery for granted.

It was worth the discomfort. We were getting there, rising steadily, while the pink glow around the pod's ports faded toward black. As our altitude increased I looked at the internal-pressure gauge — thank God for a simple mechanical gadget. It was showing normal pressure, which meant that the hull hadn't been breached on our ascent. I allowed myself the luxury of a quick look around me.

McAndrew was slumped forward in his straps, head down as low as he could get it. Sven and Jan were both leaning back, arms linked. All the faceplates were clear, so that I knew none of them had vomited in his suit — no joke, since the internal cleaning systems that would usually handle the mess were out of action.

The turbulence around the pod grew less. Stars were coming into view outside the ports as I turned us into an orbit that spiraled outward away from Vandell. I was looking for *Hoatzin*. Our orbit was clumsy and wasteful of fuel compared with what the navigation computer would have provided. But give me some credit, I was receiving no reference signals from the ship. All I had was instinct and experience.

Scooting along over the clouds, I could see a pattern to the lightning. It moved in great waves over the surface, reaching peaks in places, fading elsewhere. We had lifted from a point where all the peaks had converged, but now it was fading to look no different from the rest, Or almost so; the faint shadow of the black funnel still dipped down into the murk.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. Mac was gesturing at me, then at the helmet of his suit. I nodded and broke the seal on my own helmet. We were outside the danger zone, and it was important to re-establish contact among the group. The search for *Hoatzin* and *Merganser* might take hours, with no assistance from automated scan instruments or radio receipt of homing signals. Meanwhile, I wanted some explanations. It was clear that McAndrew and Wicklund between them had

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more idea than I did what had been happening to us.

Three miserable, greenish yellow faces emerged from the helmets. No one had thrown up, but from the look of them it had been a close thing.

"I thought it was bad when the storm hit us on the surface," said Jan. "But that was even worse. What did you do to us, Jeanie? I thought the pod was coming apart."

"So did I." Suit helmet off, I reached back to massage the aching muscles in my neck and shoulders. "We almost did. We lost the computers, the communications, the displays — everything. What *is* this crazy planet, anyway? I thought the laws of nature were supposed to be the same all over the universe, but Vandell seems to have a special exemption. What in the hell did you two *do* to the place, Jan? It was quiet as a grave until you got at it."

"It damn near was one," said McAndrew. "If you hadn't...."

He paused and swallowed. "We know what happened. That's what we were talking about before you shook us to pieces. If we'd been a bit smarter, we could have inferred it ahead of time and none of this would have happened. How much did you hear on the way up?"

I shook my head. "I tuned you out — remember? I had other things on my mind. Are you telling me you *understand* that mess down there? I thought you said it made no sense at all."

While we spoke I had taken us up to the correct height above Vandell for rendezvous with *Hoatzin*. Now it would need a steady and simple sweep to find our ship.

McAndrew wiped his hand across his pale, sweating forehead. He was looking awful, but less like a dying pickle as the minutes passed. "It didn't make sense," he said huskily. "Nothing ever does before you understand it, and then it seem obvious. I noticed something odd just before we left *Hoatzin* to go into the pod — Sven had wondered about the same thing, but neither of us gave it enough significance. Remember the list of physical variables that they recorded for Vandell when they first arrived here? No electric and magnetic fields, negligible rotation rate, no atmosphere, and cold as the pit. Does any one of those observations suggest anything to you?"

I leaned against the padded seat back. My physical exertions over the past half hour had been negligible, but tension had exhausted me totally. I looked across at him.

"Mac, I'm in no condition for guessing games. I'm too tired. For God's sake, get on with it."

He peered at me sympathetically. "Aye, you're right. Let me begin at the beginning, and keep it simple. We know that Vandell was quiet until *Merganser*'s pod landed on its surface. Within minutes of that, there was massive seismic activity and terrific electric and magnetic disturbances. We watched it, there were waves of activity over

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the whole planet — but they all had one focus, and one point of origin: where the pod landed." As McAndrew spoke his voice became firmer, strengthening now that he was back on the familiar ground of scientific explanation. "Remember the dark cone that we followed in to the surface? It was the only anomaly visible over the whole surface of the planet. So it was obvious. The impact of the pod *caused* the trouble, it was the trigger that set off Vandell's eruption."

I looked around at the others. They all seemed happy with the explanation, but to me it said absolutely nothing. I shook my head. "Mac, I've landed on fifty planets and asteroids through the System and the Halo. Never once has one shaken apart when I tried to set foot on it. So *why?* Why did it happen to Vandell?"

"Because—"

"*Because Vandell is a rogueworld,*" interrupted Sven Wicklund. We all stared at him in amazement. Sven usually never said a word about anything (except of course physics) unless he was asked a direct question. He was too shy. Now his blond hair was wet with perspiration, and there was still that distant, mystic look on his face, the look that vanished only when he laughed. But his voice was forceful. Vandell had done something to him, too.

"A rogueworld," he went on. "And one that does not rotate on its axis. That is the crux of this whole affair. Vandell rotates too slowly for us to measure it. McAndrew and I noticed, but we thought it was no more than a point of academic interest. As Eddington pointed out centuries ago, almost everything in the universe seems to rotate — planets, stars, galaxies. But *there is no law of nature that obliges* a body to rotate relative to the stars. Vandell did not, but we thought it only a curious accident."

He leaned toward me. "Think back to the time — how many million years ago? — when Vandell was first ejected from its stellar system. It had been close to the system's suns, exposed to great forces. It was hot, and maybe geologically active, and then suddenly it was thrown out, out into the void between the stars. What happened then?"

He paused, but I knew he was not expecting an answer. I waited.

He shrugged. "Nothing happened," he said. "For millions or billions of years, Vandell was alone. It slowly lost heat, cooled, contracted — just as the planets of the Solar System cooled and contracted after they were first formed. But there is one critical difference: the planets circle the Sun, and each other. As tensions inside build up, tidal forces work to release them. Earth and the planets release accumulating internal stresses through sequences of small disturbances — Earthquakes, Marsquakes, Jupiterquakes. They can never build up a large amount of pent-up energy. They are nudged contin-

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uously to internal stability by the other bodies of the system. But not Vandell. It wanders alone. With no tidal forces to work on it — not even the forces caused by its rotation in the galactic gravitational and magnetic fields — Vandell became supercritical. It was a house of cards, unstable against small disturbances. Apply one shock, and all the stored energy would be released in a chain reaction."

He paused and looked around. Then he blushed and seemed surprised at his own sudden eloquence. We all waited. Nothing else was forthcoming.

I had followed what he said without difficulty, but accepting it was another matter. "You're telling me that everything on Vandell came from the pod's landing," I said. "But what about the dust clouds? And why the intense fields? And how could they arise from an internal disturbance, like the one when we lifted off?"

Sven Wicklund didn't answer. He had apparently done his speaking for the day. He looked beseechingly for support to McAndrew, who coughed and rubbed at his head.

"Now, Jeanine," he said. "You could answer those questions for yourself if you wanted to give it a minute's thought. You know about positions of unstable equilibrium as well as I do. Make an infinitesimal displacement, and produce an unbounded change, that's the heart of it. Compared with the disturbances on Vandell for the past few million years, the landing of a pod was a superpowerful shock — more than an infinitesimal nudge. And you expect a set of spherical harmonics — with a pole at the source of energy — when you distribute energy over a sphere. As for the fields, I'll bet that you're not enough of a student of science to know what a Wimshurst machine is; but I've seen one. It was an old way of generating tremendous electromagnetic fields and artificial lightning — using simple friction of plates against each other. Vandell's crustal motion could generate fields of billions of volts, though of course they'd only last a few hours. We were there right at the worst time."

We looked back at the planet. To my eye, it was maybe a little less visible, the lightning flashes less intense across the dusty clouds.

"Poor old Vandell," said Jan. "Peaceful for all these years, then we come and ruin it. And we wanted to study a rogue planet, a place of absolute quiet. It'll never be the way it was before we got here. Well, never mind, there should be others. When we get back we'll tell people to be more careful."

When we get back.

At those words, the world snapped into a different focus. For twelve hours I had been completely absorbed by the events of the moment. Earth, the Office of External Affairs, the institute, they had not existed for me two minutes ago. Now they were present again, still far away — I looked out of

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the port, seeking the bright distant star of the sun — but *real.*

"Are you all right, Jeanie?" asked Jan. She had observed my sudden change of expression.

"I'm not sure."

It was time we told her everything. About Tallboy's decision on the future of the institute, about the cancellation of the Alpha Centauri expedition, the proposed decommissioning of the *Hoatzin,* and the way we had disobeyed official orders to follow them to Vandell. It all came rolling out like a long-stored fury.

"But you saved our lives," protested Jan. "If you hadn't taken the ship, we'd be dead. Once they know that, they won't care if you ignored some stupid regulation."

McAndrew and I stared at her, then at each other. "Child, you've got a lot to learn about bureaucracy," I said. "I know it all sounds ridiculous and trivial out here — damn it, it *is* ridiculous and trivial. But once we get back we'll waste weeks of our time, defending what we did, documenting everything, and writing endless reports on it. The fact that you would have died won't make one scrap of difference to Tallboy. He'll follow the rule book."

There was a moment of silence, while Mac and I pondered the prospect of a month of memoranda.

"What happened to the old administrator?" asked Jan at last. "You know, the one you always talked about before. I thought he was your friend and understood what you were doing?"

"You mean Woolford? There was a change of administration, and he went. The top brass change with the party, every seven years. Woolford left, and Tallboy replaced him."

"Damn that man," said McAndrew suddenly. "Everything ready for the Alpha Centauri expedition, heaps of supplies and equipment all in place; and that buffoon signs a piece of paper and kills it in two seconds."

Ahead of us, I saw a faint blink against the starry background. It had to be *Hoatzin*'s pulsed beacon, sending a brief flash of light outward every two seconds. I made a first adjustment to our orbit to take us to rendezvous, and pointed out the distant ship to the others. Mac and Sven moved closer to the port, but Jan surprised me by remaining in her seat.

"Seven years?" she said to me thoughtfully. "The administration will change again in seven years. Jeanie, what was the shipboard travel time you planned to Alpha Centauri?"

I frowned. "From Earth? One way, standing start to standing finish, would take *Hoatzin* about forty-four days."

"So from here it would be even less." She had a strange gleam in her eyes. "I noticed something before we set out. Vandell sits in Lupus, and that's a neighboring constellation to Centaurus. I remember thinking to myself before we started, its an odd coincidence, but we'll be heading in al-

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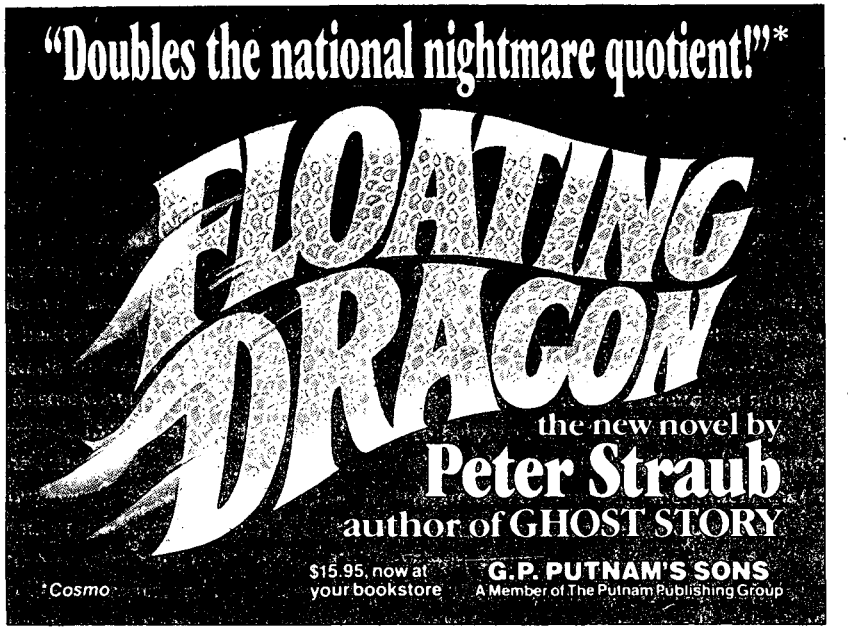

most the same direction as Mac and Jeanie. So Alpha Centauri would take less time from here, right? Less than forty-four days."

I nodded. "That's just in shipboard time, of course. In Earth time we would have been away—" I stopped abruptly. I had finally reached the point where Jan had started her thinking.

"At least eight and a half years," she said. "Alpha Centauri is 4.3 light-years from Earth, right? So by the time we get back home, we'll find a new administration; Tallboy will be gone."

I stared at her thoughtfully. "Jan, do you know what you're saying? We can't do that. And as for that 'we' you were using, I hope you don't think that Mac and I would let you and Sven take the risk of a trip like that. It's out of the question."

"Can't we at least talk about it?" She smiled. "I'd like to hear what Mac and Sven have to say."

I hesitated. "Oh, all right," I said at last. "But not now. Let's at least wait until we're back on board *Hoatzin*. And don't think I'll let you twist those two around, the way you usually do."

I frowned, she smiled.

And then I couldn't help smiling back at her.

That's the trouble with the younger generation. They don't understand why a thing can't be done, so they go ahead and do it. I hope that when the history of the first Alpha Centauri expedition is written, they'll tell how it all *really* started.

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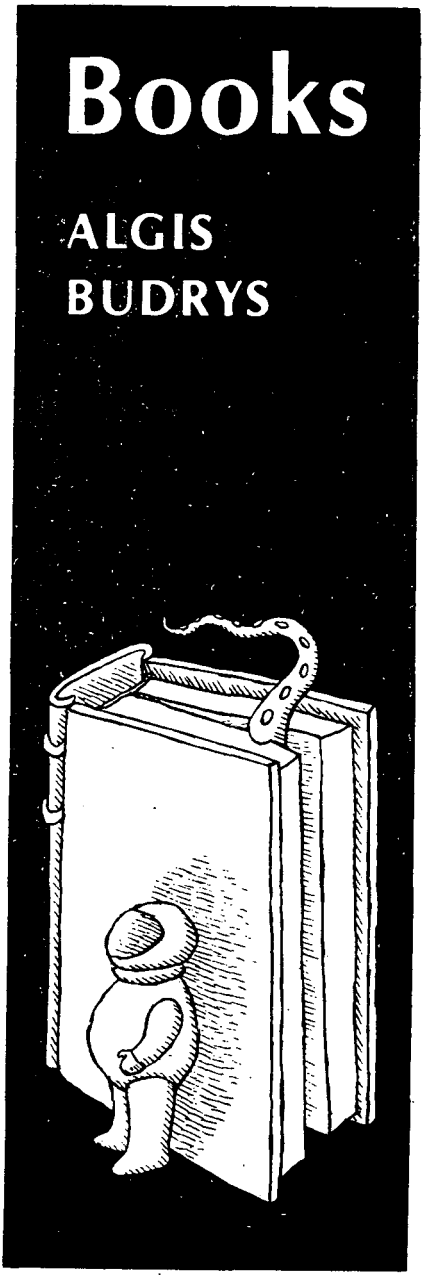
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Sideshow, Mike Resnick, Signet, $2.50.

Misplaced Persons, Lee Harding, Bantam, $2.25.

Golden Oldie:

The Tomorrow File, Lawrence Sanders, Berkley, $1.95 (in 1976).

Noted Especially:

Titus Groan, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*; by Mervyn Peake, illustrated by Mervyn Peake, introduced by Anthony Burgess. $18.95 each, in a uniform edition by Overlook Press.

Let us suppose, now, that someday SF is called before the seat of Final, Unalterable Judgment ... not the Sunday Times Book Review but the real thing ... and we, after some quick scuffles, have gotten our front row all lined up — the Aldisses and Ballards, the Delanys and Disches, the Clarkes and Heinleins, the LeGuins and the Russes. "Nah," declares the Almighty, "let's have Mike Resnick." What does He get?

He gets neither our best nor our worst, which is how it should be for His purposes. He gets a fellow of some heft, some assertiveness, unhampered by annoyingly excessive modesty. Resnick will tell you right out that he spent years being one of the most reliable and ingenious producers of strange books on short notice for odd markets under disarming pseudonyms. He will tell you this unblushingly, and with a well-earned pride in an accomplishment respected by anyone who has even the faintest notion of how difficult such a career actually is.

For those who sneer at it, I suggest

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having a friend choose a newspaper headline — one about a sprig of royalty vacationing with a soft-core actress, say, or an international financier who has just skipped into some tropical paradise that never extradites — and give you one week to produce a full-blown manuscript titled *Royal Scandals Through the Ages* or *Scam: The World of High-Finance Ripoffs*. Perhaps this sort of thing shouldn't be done at all — although that would deprive the hundreds of thousands of people eager to purchase such books. But if it is to be done at all, let me assure you the people who can do it well and on time are scarcer than the people who can put a book on the list of best-selling literature.

And that's about what the Almighty gets in Mike Resnick, excepting such additional traits as a very real, concealed modesty, and the ability to hold the respect and affection of a fair number of thoughtful people, and in short a personality which, if further described, might indeed evoke a blush. But that is neither here nor there when the question becomes What sort of SF does he write? What matters then is only that it's the sort done with respect and affection.

One of the things to remember about such Mike Resnick books as *Sideshow* is that he could have made more money and spent less time writing something else. His skills are quite sufficently honed. But, having spent these quite few years making sure his household is reasonably secure against wolves at the door, he is now free to write what he wants to write, in the manner and at a pace he feels appropriate. The last conspicuous exemplar of this maneuver was Robert Silverberg, and that worked out O.K. How is it with Resnick?

Well, it's a little hard to say. *Sideshow* has been recommended for a Nebula, but I think that's about as close as it comes to being of award-winning caliber. It has a ridiculous central premise; that alien tourists, desirous of visiting Earth at all, would so deliberately limit their freedom of action as to pretend employment at a carnival freak show. But given this piece of forced logic, the rest of the story unfolds believably enough, in a narrative that handles its details well enough.

Resnick is not a breathtaking hand with characterization. A crucial character — Thaddeus Flint, owner of a rival carnival — goes from ruthless small-time finagler to big-time diamond in the rough for no discernible reason but that the author needed him to make that transition. Another, the viewpoint character, who is a dwarf with a stutter, gets through all 60,000 words without once feeling like anything else but a physiological normal human being, except in those moments when he stops to outright say, "For you see, reader, I am a stuttering dwarf."

Neither is Resnick a master of detail. The dwarf speaks hundreds of

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quoted lines without stuttering, and, of course, it is also his voice we hear throughout the narration, which is written in smooth standard English. This sort of gaffe more than compensates for Resnick's knowledgeable-seeming inclusion not only of carny terms but of carny milieux. The scenes involving relationships with cops, and of power hierarchies within the carny world, argue for Resnick's actually having lived that life. (I don't know whether he has, nor do I have to.) My point is that there are things Resnick does well, and things he does less than well, and sometimes they are the same things. The chances are, then, that he will never do any piece of SF so well that the Almighty will consider him beyond being representative of what we are.

Sideshow is an easily read, untroubling book. That does not make it simpleminded. It contains some very sharp insights into how intelligent aliens really might be — much as you and I, but not in the ways in which that point is usually made by lesser writers. The aliens, once under Flint's thumb, do not prove to be universally loveable despite all that, and they do not prove to be universally selfless in their common cause, either ... Resnick thus passes up the opportunities for sloppy sentimentality that could have turned this novel into pap. But that restraint, commendable though it be, does not suffice to make a man a Dostoevsky — not that SF abounds in artists of that caliber.

And all of that, I think, is the point, or at least part of it. We stand or fall not on the work of rare, meticulous artists, although we have a few — fewer than we often pretend, but some. Neither do we need to accept the judgements of those who can always find some piece of dreadful hackwork with which to condemn the entire field, for all that the hackwork is not rare enough. We stand on the work of nice guys like Mike Resnick, with his better-than-average craftsmanship and sophistication, his affection for the field, his understanding of it, his desire to contribute to it, and his sense that he wants to write some books in which people do not kill each other, in which exploitation proves to be less practical than cooperation, and in which things get better rather than worse. *Sideshow* is the first of a series. The cover depicts a woman with three breasts. The next cover features a woman with three legs. (Resnick, perhaps brusquely turning his back on Monty Python, denies that the third will show a man with three buttocks.) But don't let any of that put you off. You will not be dazzled, but you will be entertained by someone who knows what Sf readers mean by entertainment.

Misplaced Persons in the Bantam edition is a reprint of a 1979 Harper & Row "award winning" novel, according to information given in the book.

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What the award might have been, book saith not. Neither is this story a novel, as distinguished from a novella — it's about two-thirds the length of what's commonly considered a novel, and its plot barely qualifies it to be more than an expanded short story. It's — you see — a "YA" novel; a Young Adult book.

Nevertheless, I call it to your attention because it partakes of some features that prove unexpectedly powerful, even if some of them appear borrowed from "New Wave" writers. It all begins when Graeme, an Australian teenager, can't get service at McDonald's. Soon enough, not even his mother notices him when he shouts at her, and his girl friend can't see him or feel him even when he spends the night in her room with her. (A situation the cover painting exploits with subtlety and skill worthy of note in your next discussion about how crude sexploitation always is.) The world turns gray; food is tasteless, and then an interface grows until Graeme can't actually handle or ingest anything ... it just slips away, somehow.

Lost and wandering, Graeme has moments that evoke genuine pangs; the discovery of a single red and palpable rose on an otherwise gray and untouchable bush; a tidal pool in which one can actually swim; a little food that, like the rose and the (short-lived) pool, has "come through" into his world, along with two other people.

The two other people are a bitter, sharpish delinquent girl, and a besotted old teacher who wanders the gray streets playing the recorder.* Graeme is taken into their household, and joins them in their incessant hunt for edible food, potable water, and fuel. They live together, briefly, in a ramshackle house that has "come through" in its entirety.

Graeme tells his story, from its beginning to its climactic isolation and schizoid flatness, into a recorder.# He found it — and, fortunately, an extra cassette — in a supermarket. Then the old drunk, and then the girl, and finally Graeme himself — by now gripped in fearful desolation — wink out, like the tidal pool.

Not *too* shabby, eh? There is nothing here that Ballard, Disch and Malzberg haven't done in greater detail to better effect, and, tell you the truth, in the beginning I thought I was reading a reprise of a twenty-five-year-old story of mine. A comparative reading of *Misplaced Persons* and Malzberg's *In My Parents' Bedroom*‡ might prove even more nostalgic, and in any case would show you the difference between a Lee Harding and a first-class talent.

But not *too* shabby. The plot trails off; no definite cause for this phenome-

**The musical instrument, not the electronic device.*

#The electronic device, not the musical instrument.

‡Olympia Press, 1971.

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non is ever decisively ascribed, things get worse and better of their own accord, and the most truly notable thing about this book is that it seems there can now be nudity in YA novels — casually described nudity between young lad and his lass — and unmarried people of the two sexes can sleep together as long as they just sleep. (Which means that the rules permit a species of titillation that Harding does not pass up, enroute to his award.) There is also a ludicrously desperate search for firewood that has "come through," by people living in a rambling, ramshackle wooden house that has "come through" entire. (In addition, McDonald's does not serve cole slaw,' Timothy Budrys, the published poet, points out to me; not in the U.S., at least, sez I.) Not too shabby, and yet at times *very* nearly so.

What counts in the end is that Harding's book duplicates the long processes of time. In his own way, he has borrowed here and there, added this furniture to a common primal fear which he may or may not consider an original inspiration, and produced what amounts to a generification. Long after Aldiss and Disch and the rest of those fellows are forgotten, this sort of story will have drifted into the folklore, and when the Almighty looks for what was truly viable in SF, this is what He will find, smoothed off and grayed like some slumped old range of timeworn mountains, far more often than He will encounter some sharp-edged cleft or some bright, shining peak.

A Golden Oldie I had never read before crossed my path in the form of *The Tomorrow File*, at Martha Beck's recommendation. If you haven't read it, you might very well want to. Originally a 1975 Putnam novel, my copy is the 1976 Berkley reprint, sold at $1.95 and purchased secondhand for less than a dollar.

Lawrence Sanders at that time was known primarily for two thrillers, *The Anderson Tapes* (which made a Sean Connery caper film), and *The First Deadly Sin*, which made a nearly incomprehensible vehicle for Frank Sinatra and Faye Dunaway. I'd read the latter in its first reprint edition, thriller buff that I am, and though impressed with Sanders' inventiveness and intelligence, had decided that his air of cultivated decadence was phoney, and worse, not bent to the interest of propelling the story but intended merely as garnish for the supposed appetites of thriller readers. Taking that as a species of insult, I stayed away from further Sanders offerings, including *The Tomorrow File* when it first came out.

I still think it's fraught with what are now confirmed as Sanders quirks; if two men are going to sleep together in a story, I think we are then owed the development of an affair of love, or love/hate, just as if any two of the other sorts of potential lovers had performed

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essentially similar acts. But for Sanders these are merely events on a calendar. It is true that one lover eventually does the other in, but so anemically has Sanders drawn their relationship that there is no special sense of betrayal at all.

I can see the point of long-time fan Martha Beck's admiration for this book, which is about the rise and fall of a brilliant careerist in a future U.S.A. ruled by a meritocracy of scientists. Corrupted by its politicization, science now serves only the short-term purposes of social management; there is a world of funding for work on new controls of the mind and body, and no future in attempting pure or long-term research. Here Sanders does a chilling, excellent job of extrapolating not too far forward from the actual mood and tone of the later 1970s with respect to science research, and his inventive but blinkered protagonist is a tour de force evocation of one of the most frequently encountered personalities in the science establishment, both then and, even more noticeably, now.

Where the book comes apart, finally, for me, is in its failure to ultimately make something of its story. Sanders recites long lists of furniture — social milieux, research and manufacturing nomenclature, literal hardware and software — by sheer weight of inventory seems to be depicting a future. But the story he has to tell us about the future is that it's like *We*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; that we are well on our way toward the day when H.G. Wells's Morlocks and Eloi will exist in fact, and we the more horrible because we shall not be the Eloi. Rather, we shall be feasters on Eloi.

But it's not Sanders who shows us that. What Sanders has done for his audience, is to catalogue a freak show — the terrifying, inhuman future packed full of nomenclature. And that's the appeal he calculated for. It's only the comparative minority, the experienced SF readers with a taste for speculation as distinguished from reaction, who will naturally take this construction seriously as a piece of thinking, distinguished from horripilation. We are, in other words — sorry, Martha — making a mistake in thinking Sanders capable of speculation as distinguished from packratting the ideas of powerful speculators.

But that, too, provides a gauge to Those concerned with how much power actually resides with our art.

And not apropos of all this, I would like to tell you about the Overlook Press editions of *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*?

The late Mervyn Peake, beneficiary of a flare of popularity toward the end of his life, is now beginning to pull off the trick of being immortal. It is now fourteen years since Peake's death, and this work, which Baird Searles has said is among the most brilliant and extraordinary works of fiction he has ever read, has found a fitting complement

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in these new editions. Well made, beautifully designed, the three books include Peake's own illustrations and an Anthony Burgess introduction.

Peake was a genius — a darker, more powerful fantasist than, for instance, Tolkien — and the Titus trilogy invents a world with, I think, more texture to it than any other in the long English tradition of such brilliant solitary creations. You will also find, I think, that much of the contemporary fantasy you thought was a Tolkien ripoff instead owes a great deal to Peake. Certainly the story of Titus, son of Sepulchrave, heir to Gormenghast, and his gradual accession to manhood, sound familiar enough in outline to a contemporary reader.

Fear not. What you will read is incomparably richer, spikier, more mettlesome and provocative than any of its genericized successors.

Overlook — a company founded some years ago by paperback editor/publisher Peter Mayer and his father — has a history of preserving, and occasionally originating, hardcover books of uncommon interest, and of handling them with respect and acumen. The wrappers of this new edition, for example, reproduce the artwork of the orginal British editions, embodied in a new and effective cover design. To do this, Mayer had to locate the artwork and purchase it at auction in England. (You want to remember that any outright commercial publisher would consider Mayer daft to go to such lengths.)*

Next year, Overlook will publish Peake's *Mr. Pye*, a novel I am told has previously been published only as a Penguin paperback. All this gives Overlook credit. It also gives credit to Peake, and thus, in the end, to SF.

**Overlook, an independent company, has its books distributed by Viking Press. However, by the time you read this, not many stores will have this January 19 release in stock. For $1.85 additional each, shipping and handling, the trilogy can be ordered directly from Overlook at Lewis Hollow Road, Woodstock, NY 12498.*

ANSWER TO APRIL ACROSTIC:

Williamson: *The Humanoid Touch*

"It's singing tones were still the same, and its slender shape. It danced across the charred firegrass with the same fluid grace. Its golden brand still glinted. But the rest of its sleek and sexless nudity was no longer black, but clad now in harlequin velvet, blazing blues and lurid greens."

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Nancy Springer is new to F&SF, however she has published a successful trilogy called THE BOOK OF SUNS. The novels in the series are The Silver Sun, The White Hart, *and* The Sable Moon, *and this totally independent short story is set against the same background.*

Amends

A TALE OF THE SUN KINGS

BY

NANCY SPRINGER

The procession wound through streets lined with cheering people. Hal and Alan, the Sun Kings, had returned to their court city of Laueroc after a month's journey. The news had flown; everyone had turned out to greet them.

They rode at the head of their retainers. They made no showy cavalcade; the Kings shunned ostentation at any time, and that day their plain clothing was travel-stained. But their horses were beautiful, they themselves beautiful and well loved, the circlets, silver and gold, riding high on their youthful heads. The crowd cheered them wildly. Alan grinned and hailed people he knew. Hal, more restrained as always, glanced about him. Petitioners waited at the castle gates, shouting like the rest — One face among the many caught his searching eye, the one that did not cry out a greeting, that looked back at him white and still. Hal pulled his steed to a halt as memory took hold of him. Vision, rather, seen through eyes not his own....

Ward shivered in a winterbound cottage darkened by early dusk, snow blowing in through the cracks death-white and a fiercer storm coming on. They were all sick, lying abed, mother and the boys and the small sister, everyone except himself and the useless old man his father. Not much to eat, nothing to burn except the innards of the cottage itself. They would destroy their home from within, feed it to the fire as the fever fed at their vitals; they would die. The youth rose, gave to the small blaze the three-legged stool he had been sitting on — and then came the knock at the door.

"Open it, Ward," said his father numbly from his place by the hearth.

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"Who could it be except lordsmen?" the young man flared in reply. "Let them knock."

The father rose stiffly and went to the door himself, undid the string latch. The door swung open with a bang, blown aside by the wind. No lordsmen stood there. Instead, there in the white whirl of snow stood two youths, hoods back in defiance of the cold, their cloaks whipping about them. Ward stared. They looked no older than himself, and yet far older. Behind them loomed dark, leggy shapes — their horses. Horses! He resented them already.

"Your hospitality, Goodman, or we are likely to perish in this smother." It was the grave-faced one who spoke, as much in command as in request. Ward noticed his gray eyes, curiously intense. Noticed them from all the way across the room.

"To be sure, you are welcome," replied his father courteously, "though we've little enough to offer you."

Hot anger flamed up in Ward, warming him as the fire could not. What would these strangers care if they ate everyting and left his family destitute? He stepped forward, fists clenched, but no one looked at him.

"Did I see a cowshed yonder?" the second youth asked. He was blond and held his mouth in a faintly humorous half smile.

"Ay. Naught in it."

"I'll put the horses there, then." The two of them swung into motion in the manner of men who have long been accustomed to each other's ways of doing things, wordlessly. In a moment a knobby pile of bundles and gear had grown on the doorstep, the blond youth had led the horses into the gathering darkness and the other had stepped inside, swinging his pack.

"I am Hal," he said quietly, "and my brother's name is Alan."

"Worth, they call me," the goodman introduced himself, "and yon is my eldest, Ward, and the wife Embla, and the younger ones...." His tired voice faltered away.

"And all sick with fever," Hal muttered. He dropped his pack and strode straight across the room, kneeling and feeling at the woman's forehead with a delicate fingertip touch.

"Let her alone!" Ward shouted, startled. Most folk would shied away.

Hal did not move. "Put on some water to boil," he said absently. "We'll make her a broth, some tea—"

"There's nothing except potatoes and old turnips!"

"Ward!" his father reproved him.

Hal got up and crossed to his pack, loosened the fastening. He drew out a sack of oats and one of maslin flour and a chunk of meat wrapped in the raw deerhide. Alan blundered in at the door, shouldering an enormous bundle of firewood. He grinned at the goodman, who was staring at him open-mouthed.

"We try not to come visiting emptyhanded," he said, easing his load to

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the earthen floor. Hal had shoved the foodstuffs aside and was rooting impatiently in the recesses of his pack.

"Alan, see if you can't get some water started. I can't find my agrimony — oh, there it is."

Alan stood still. "Sickness," he murmured, looking across the room to where a sufferer stirred and trembled.

"Ay. Where's a pot? By the mothers, must I do everything myself?"

"I will take care of it," Worth said unexpectedly. He dipped the water from a covered bucket. A half-fearful hope enlivened his face, made it look years younger. Ward stirred from his stance in the middle of the floor and sullenly sat on it, idle. He felt hateful, and guilty at his own anger. These two had brought help, but he could not like them any the better for it, not when they made him feel foolish. He almost wished they had been brigands after all.

His ill humor kept him from enjoying the food much, though it was the best he had eaten in months. Real meat, venison! Hal made a rich, good soup with a sort of bread in it for strength. He spooned off the broth and fed it to the invalids. He and Alan did not eat much. By the time everyone was done it was late, very dark, and the fire was dying to a flicker. Alan rose, yawning, and set about fastening a blanket over the worst portion of the wall. It blew and billowed as if there were no wall at all.

"What a wind," he grumbled. "Listen to it, would you!"

Moans and howls sounded overhead. Something sobbed just above the rafters. Worth gasped and dropped with a clatter the pan he was washing.

"That's no wind," he stammered. "Black Nick is on the wild hunt tonight, him and his red-eared hounds, come to take souls as lords take deer, the mothers help us!" The words caught in his throat.

"He shall not have them," Hal said flatly. He took a seat by the little girl who lay and whimpered on her cot by the wall. "Get that fire going."

Worth numbly obeyed, his face twitching. Ward could not move; he felt frozen. Something was mewling and wailing around the eaves. "It sounds like babies," he whispered.

"The souls that run before," Hal said sternly. "Pay no attention. I tell you, he shall not have these."

"How do you propose to prevent him?" Alan asked, almost as if it were impossible.

"It is fear that draws him here like a scent, the fear and despair — feel them in the room, here, almost as solid as the night? I have felt them since I entered. Fire and warm food weren't enough."

A high-pitched distant yelping sound, overhead, where it had no right to be — wild geese, Ward thought. But it was not the season for wild geese.

"We have no elfin balm," said Alan.

"I know. You think I haven't longed

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— well. Let me try it with the plinset."

Alan handed over the instrument in its leather case. Hal took it out carefully, warm gleaming of well-loved wood. ... Music was a rare occurrence. A chant or a few sung words flung to the wind might be all a person heard from one year to the next. When Hal struck a soft chord, it was as much a sound of wonder and delight as the hunt was a sound of terror.

"Lint in the bell," Hal murmured. He sang the song of the blue flax flowers and the summer sun. Alan joined in on the choruses, tuning his voice a triad away, lending resonance. The sound of music shut out for the listeners the weird noises without; the room filled with the glow of imagined sunlight. Hal went on at once to another song, this one about heartsease and the flower of that name.

He defied the powers of winter and death — but only as an embrace defies hatred. Some of his songs were full of valor and glorious folly, some witty, some of them sad, but all were very much alive, all warm. The bedridden folk stopped their shivering and moaning. Even the fire seemed to glow more steadily and bright.

The children settled one by one into peaceful slumber, and then the mother, and then Ward, leaning his head against the wall where he sat by himself in the farthest corner. He was aware for a while of Hal's playing, and then he swam like a trout to a deeper place, so he thought. ... Then he had a strange and vivid dream.

It seemed to him that the door burst open with a freezing blast of air. And there in the black entry of night stood a specter, eight feet tall, a skull for head and branching from the skull two great forked horns. Hal rose to face it, his plinset in his hands.

"You shall not have them, Arawn," he said.

Arawn was the black rider's name in the western tongue. His shadow loomed huge upon the wall. At his shoulder nodded the gaunt head of his pale, luminous horse, and around his heels crowded the red-eared hounds, uneasily amused.

"How can you defy me?" Though the giant spoke hollowly through his naked, clacking teeth, he seemed amused.

"I defy you with mortal defiance," said Hal. "The spirit that has always defied you. Take your leave."

"Why, you poor fool," Black Nick boomed, "don't you know it is no use? Poor silly hero — give way, now, before I take you as well. I suppose next you will be offering yourself in their stead."

"Nay. You are to have none of us this night." Hal stood taut but firm.

"And who are you, that you think you can deny me my rightful game?" All amusement had vanished from the spectral hunter's voice.

"I am Hal, son of Gwynllian, heir to Torre and Taran and the Blessed Kings of Welas, Star Son, Son of the

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Mothers, Very King."

"No court has hailed you," Black Nick mocked.

"The time is not yet. The gypsies hail me, and the elves, and the spirits of the dead."

"Yours is a mighty magic," the prince of darkness said, "but not mighty enough to halt me. Give way." Towering, he took a step forward. Hal trembled, struggling within himself, forcing himself to say yet one more thing.

"I am Mireldeyn," he whispered, "and I bid you begone."

Black Nick stopped where he stood.

"Well," he said, in a voice impersonal and oddly gentle. "Well. You know then that there is a price to pay."

"I pay with every breath."

The specter gave a nod, perhaps a sort of bow, his spreading antlers scraping against the rafters. Then he turned and vanished in a single stride. The door banged behind him, and it seemed to Ward that Hal went limp and nearly fell, that Alan appeared from somewhere, caught hold of him to support him. What happened after that he could not tell, for he was asleep. Was he not asleep?

When he got up in the morning Hal was lying near the fire in a sleep that was almost a swoon. Alan was quietly cooking oatmeal, and Ward's mother was sitting up in her bed, staring at the strangers. The children lay sleeping peacefully, and so did Worth. Ward stumbled over to his mother's bedside.

"Are — are you all right?" he stammered, unbelieving.

"I seem to be much better." Embla turned her puzzled eyes on her son. "What has happened, Ward? I remember music, the sweetest of music—"

"Nothing. Nothing has happened." Ward shook his head vehemently, shaking off memory, shaking off shreds of dream.

Snow still fell heavily, but the wind calmed. The snow ceased to seem an enemy, became an insulating downy comforter that sealed them, cocoon-like, from all harm. Alan trudged outside and returned with firewood and more meat from the haunch he had hung behind the cowshed. The snow was his veil; no lordsmen would threaten. Alan made stew, and the children sat up and ate it, all three of them, while Worth moved from one to the other to his wife in restless joy. Hal still lay in a stupor. Alan hauled and heaved him into a bed and he hardly stirred.

"Will he be all right?" Worth asked anxiously.

"Ay, he is just — tired. He was up all night — nursing them," Alan said awkwardly. "Herbs—"

"And something more," Worth stated with a keen glance.

Ward thought of his father as a coward because he quietly met the demands of the lordsmen who kept him constantly poor. Surely the old man did not mean — no. It was too fright-

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ening. It was just a dream. Even though Alan seemed more strained and anxious than he had any reason to be.

In midafternoon Alan made an abrupt gesture and went over to wake Hal, took him in his arms, pulled him up against his powerful chest. "Hal!" he called him, but Hal's head hung limp; there was no response. Alan spoke very softly in his ear: "Mireldeyn." Ward stood near enough to hear the word. Hal's eyes fluttered open and he made a dry sobbing sound.

"All right," Alan murmured. "It's all right. Wake up. Please." He helped Hal to sit up on his own. And to Ward's astonishment and chagrin, his father went and knelt by the bed.

"Lord," said Worth huskily, "they are better, they will be well. A thousand thanks—" Hal gave him the ghost of a smile.

"Never mind that," he said. "You have turnips. Would you get me one? I ought to eat."

"A turnip!" Worth protested. "Lord, there is meat."

"I get meat all the time. You take the meat. I'll take a turnip."

They spent the evening gathered around the hearth, all of them, even the little ones, talking and talking in a sort of celebration. It was family talk, tales of good times or funny times, touching only lightly on the hardships, the grinding difficulty of life under greedy lord and evil king. Ward sat scowling in their midst, full of rebellion. How could they prattle so? Saved, for what? Brutish slavery, he thought. Hal did not sing. He sat quietly, looking pale, and when the rest of them went to sleep he paced about, the hollows of his cheeks and eyes looking huge in the dim light. Ward, half-wakeful, was aware of his pacing, aware that Alan kept him company and whispered with him from time to time. He chose not to be aware that they spoke of the specter, and Mireldeyn, and the price that must be paid, the loneliness.

The next day Embla was up and about for a while. The snow stopped. Toward evening Hal and Alan packed their things, planning to be off in the morning. They sat by the fire for an hour and went early to bed. That night everyone slept.

Everyone except Ward. When the fire had died down from embers to ashes he slipped from his bed and crept softly to the piles of gear near the door, opened a pack. In the shaft of moonlight that wavered through the single window he examined the contents—

"Ward!" It was his father, whispering. "What are you doing?"

"Digging carrots!" he whispered back hotly. He rummaged in the pack, muttering to himself. "Here we are to sit, starving, and likely they have gold, booty, who knows what."

"Are you mad?" his father gasped. "Are you my son? You would thieve from those who befriended us?"

Ward made no reply. He drew

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from the pack a burnished helm and stared at it in the moonlight. There were old songs about a sunset king who would rid Isle of the oppressors; Ward discounted them. But he admired the helm. It shone with the subtle glow of rare silver.

"There," he breathed.

"Put it back!" hissed Worth.

"Nay, indeed. I plan to feed my brothers and sister if you will not." Ward reached for Hal's sword. Worth restrained him.

"You will get yourself killed!" he cried, forgetting silence. "If I did not submit to the lord's demands we would all be dead!" His wife stirred, and he lowered his voice again. "Put that helm back. What, boy, do you think they will tamely let you have it?"

Ward shook off his father's grip. "They are outlaws," he said impatiently. "They have no recourse."

"No recourse!" Worth choked, then laughed heartily and silently, a rare event for him and one his son could least stand, to be laughed at. "Do you mean to tell me you have not noticed Hal's power?" he gasped. "You cannot face him and prevail."

Anger and frustration rushed through Ward — the interfering old man! He struck out at his father with the hand that clutched the silver helm, knocking Worth sideways with a metallic thud. The next instant he was himself flung backwards, landing hard on the dirt floor. Hal's hands pinned him there, and he lay frozen, unable to move, stunned by the blazing wrath in those moonlit eyes; he had never seen such flashing fury. Hal panted with rage, and yet when he spoke he spoke evenly. "Now listen," he said. The phrase was a command. "I will lie and watch you filch from my pack, and if there were any coin in there I'd let you have it, I would have given it to you before now. And I will lie and watch you finger my helm. But I will not lie and watch you strike your father. That you do at your peril."

Worth was standing behind Hal, pale. "Don't hurt him, Lord," he begged, and Ward realized with a sudden pang that Worth's fear was all for his worthless son.

Hal got up and in the same effortless motion he lifted Ward upright, grasping him by the shoulders, shaking him. "If I had a father like yours," he said intensely, "if I had ever had a loving father, even for a day—"

"Hush, Hal." Alan stood beside him. "You'll wake the little one."

He released Ward and turned away from him. "Let's go."

"In the middle of the night?" Alan asked mildly.

"Ay, so much the better. The wind is up again; it will cover our traces before dawn. Let's go." He turned to the goodman. "The deer is hanging in the brush behind the cowshed, frozen. Eat it or trade the meat for what you need."

"What can I give you for thanks?" asked Worth. "I owe you so much...."

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"Your loyalty. You will know what to do when the time comes."

Now Hal was King, Sunset King. Worth had helped make him so. And now he had encountered Ward again. The youth stared back at him, white-faced, and he had seen himself through those frightened eyes.

Hal vaulted down off his elfin steed, waved his retainers onward and strode to where Ward stood, took his limp hand in welcome. The youth trembled under that touch.

"Ward! I can't believe it!" Alan stood by Hal's side, warmth and concern in this voice. "What brings you to Laueroc? Nothing wrong, I hope?"

The youth lifted his lowered eyes, incredulous. They were greeting him as old friends! His lips moved, but he could not produce an answer.

"Is your father all right?" Alan asked worriedly.

"Fine!" Ward stammered. "He lost an arm in the fighting—" He looked down again. His so-called coward of a father had led the assault on the lord's stronghold while he, Ward, had trembled in line, missed his aim—

"But he is all right without it?" Hal asked.

Ward nodded.

"Of course, he would be," said Hal. "He has that quiet courage. How are your mother and the little ones?"

"Fine." Ward managed the one word and no more. He faced his King whom he had wronged, his King who had swept away the lordsmen like dirt off the land. His head swam and he could not meet those gray eyes. "Lord," he whispered, "please kill me and have it done with."

"Mothers, what am I to do with him?" Hal appealed. "Ward, can't you tell I mean you no harm?"

"Bring him in," Alan said. "This is going to take a while." At a soft glance from Hal he smiled and went in himself, to his castle chamber, his lady and his supper. Hal led Ward and the horses to the stable. He rubbed his steed dry with a cloth while Ward watched in wonder. How one so kingly could care for his own—

"Surely you don't really want me to kill you, Ward," Hal remarked. "What is the matter? Why have you come to see me?"

"I — Lord, I am so ashamed. I must make amends somehow."

"Why? That row we had?" Hal paused as he pulled down fodder, looked at the youth. "It was nothing. We can forget it, we have both grown since then. Alan tells me that everyone hates his father one time or another, that it is part of the love."

Ward winced. He had lately left his father with a harvest to get in, all for no better reason than his own uneasy ache. "I feel as if I've done nothing right in all my life," he said.

Hal snorted, blanketing a horse. "Let go of shame for a while, Ward, and think! Turn and face the thing

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that is chasing you."

The youth stood stiff with fear again. "But that's just it," he whispered. "The shame."

"Not a certain dream in the night?"

Ward shook and sweated as if the fever had hold of him at last. "I knew it was real," he said hoarsely.

"I gave you strong herbs," Hal said. "You should have been fast asleep. You should never have seen."

"I was a coward, I would not move to help you—"

"Help me!" Hal exclaimed. "Even Alan could not help me much that night. I could scarcely help myself. I could scarcely stand."

"I am a coward!" Words burst out of Ward. "I saw your power, you defeated Death himself, you are — you are a wizard, or a god, I don't know what you are, you saved us all and I hated you for it, I am such a wretch! I am terrified of you, I wish you would strike me so I could hate you—" Ward covered his quivering face with his hands. "Liege, help me," he choked.

Incredibly, he felt arms around him. "It is all right, truly it is," said Hal softly. "Those were dark days, dark years. You were filled with bitterness, and I — after that night with Arawn I was so tired I had no patience, no strength to befriend you. I must always struggle to befriend. Your fear is the price Arawn mentioned, the price I pay."

Ward stopped trembling and glanced up, startled. Hal nodded at him, his face bleak, his gray eyes unnaturally bright.

"It is not just you.... Ward, whatever gave you the notion that you are a coward, that you do nothing right? You are here, are you not? Here, inches from me? Why?"

"Amends..."

"Then you are honorable as well as brave." With a small smile Hal released him. "There is no need for amends. Just seeing you here is enough."

"It is not enough," said Ward with a daring that surprised him. "Lord, there must be something I can do."

"A penance?" Hal grumbled. "No need." But Ward did not hear; a thought had taken hold of him.

"You say my fear — people's fear — is the price you pay for — being what you are?"

Hal only nodded, watching him.

The youth felt as if he was risking his life. All wary instincts made him feel that way. Nevertheless, he squared his shoulders, straightened himself with a long indrawn breath and met the bright gray eyes. It had to be done, even if he should die for his temerity—

"Why, then, Liege, if it pleases you, I for one will no longer be afraid," he said, unwavering. And he saw with delight that for once in his life he had done something exactly, ineffably right. Joy touched those shining eyes.

"Amends are made," Hal said.

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Tom Easton's new story concerns a man whose marriage has gone sour and a clearing in the woods where nothing grows...

A Love Story

BY

THOMAS A. EASTON

The road his feet walked now was paved, but it was not important enough in the scheme of things to warrant a yellow stripe down its middle. Its blacktop was checkered with cracks and patches. Its camber was warped. Its shoulders slumped into its ditches. It shone with neglect as it wandered among woods and fields and past bedraggled apple trees whose fallen fruit still scented the air.

He wasn't going far. From his house nearer town, he could hear the trucks and cars on the Interstate. From his destination, he would still be able to hear an occasional loud truck. He would see nothing, though, beyond the bare brown canes of berry plants, nets of naked branches against the sky, fading colors in the new-fallen leaves he would scuff along the path.

The path left the road a mile ahead. It skirted a pasture, tunneled through an alder thicket, climbed a wooded hill, and dipped to flank a brook he knew. The big browns bred there. Every fall, they came up from the lake. Fat and lazy, they gathered in the pools, their fins waving like banners, while they chose banks of gravel for their redds.

He had passed there once with a friend. Shotguns in the crooks of their arms, they had been looking for partridge. When they had come to the brook, its banks hung with dry bracken, they had seen the trout. The friend had straddled a small pool, one barely big enough for the two fish it held, aimed his gun between his legs, and pulled his trigger. Each of them, then, had put a fish in his game bag and prayed they wouldn't meet a warden.

Now he wished to check that brook again. If the fish were there, he might come back at night. He had a thick

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wool jacket, all red and black in checks, which would protect him against the cold that came when the sun went down. He had a folding net. He had a sucker spear, too, but he thought the net would work the better. Either would offer less risk than a shotgun of attracting a warden's attention.

Too, he wondered if the blight were still there. Last time, near the brook, he and his friend had passed a clearing where nothing grew. That had been two years ago, and he still wondered at it. There had been only stubble where there should have been winter-dead weeds and vines and small trees.

The road was quiet. No cars passed. The few houses he saw were closed in on themselves, smoke drifting from their chimneys. In this season, their residents had no more outdoor chores. Gardens were done for the year. Lawns had finished growing. Firewood was all cut and split and stacked under cover, in woodsheds and garages and basements. A light breeze rattled remnant leaves. The loudest sounds were the whisking of his denimed thighs, the soft clap of his leather boots on the tar.

Yet there was other sound ahead. He heard the chunk of metal on rock, a slosh, an impatient voice. The breeze brought him an odor of foulness. He raised his head, quieted his thoughts, and tried to see past the curve before him, through a tangle of naked lilacs, over a brow of roof and porch.

He rounded the curve. A lawn sloped up to his right. There was a gravel drive just beyond it. Both were carpeted with leaves, golden in the sun, framing a pile of dirt, spade sticking out aslant, a metal wheelbarrow, deep and dripping, and a hole. A woman leaned over the hole, gripping a rope. As he watched, she drew up a bucket and poured its contents, black and viscous, into the barrow.

He left the pavement. He knew the woman, and his nose told him what she was doing. "Afternoon, Miz Jenkins."

She straightened to glare at him boldly. "It's Molly, dammit. I've told you before." She was a tall woman, almost as tall as he, with a glossy black mane and a figure that was defiantly female. She was not beautiful. Her face was too square for that, her lips too thin, her nose too sharp. But her fingers were long and slender, and he had heard her in town, playing the piano and singing her own songs. She had beauty in her.

"Molly," he granted her. He put his hands in his back pockets and leaned on one hip. "Cleaning out the septic tank?"

She gave him a look that said, "You need to ask?" Aloud, she said, "Gotta do it every few years. Last time, Nick took care of it." Like him, like too many of his neighbors lately, she was divorced. He didn't wonder why. There was a plague hereabouts, an infection that sharpened women's tongues and hardened their hearts. His own

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wife had shown the signs over a year ago. Molly still did, though they had faded since her husband had fled.

"Want a hand?"

She tossed her bucket into the hole again. It clattered against rocks in the soil, perhaps on the rim of the concrete tank itself. It splashed, and drops of sludge joined those already spattering her slacks. "Almost done." She waved at the wheelbarrow, its blue paint obscured by filth. "Last load. Putting it on the garden. I'll till it under tomorrow."

He reached for the rope. Almost reluctantly, she let him have it. He twitched it to make the bucket tip and fill, hoisted, poured. When the barrow was full, he helped her fit the lid back onto the tank and fill in the hole. Then he took the barrow's handles and — carefully, for its load sloshed and surged — trundled it out back to Molly's garden. He worked in silence, except when she asked him, "Still at the university?" He laughed then. "Yes," he told her. "Still teaching literature to incorrigibles. Still..."

"Still writing?" Her voice was softer.

"Still writing." And fame still eluded him, as it did her.

"I've got some cider inside, for when we're done."

They reached the garden. She stopped him when he began to tip the barrow. "I want to spread it," she explained, and she shoved him. She dipped a bucket full of sludge and heaved it, a fanning spray of tarry gunk that would, come spring and summer, nourish her crops and herself. The breeze, still gentle, caught the stink. He gasped and stepped aside.

But he did not step far enough. The next bucketful caught him across the thighs.

She said, "Oh, sh—!"

He swore. He said, "Why don't you look where you're heaving that stuff?"

She made brushing motions with her hands, but she stopped herself before actually touching him. "Let's go inside. Get you cleaned up. I've got a washing machine, and there are still some of Nick's things." The words rushed from her mouth, driven by embarrassment.

"No. thanks." He spat the words, his voice bitter. He turned away, stalking, barely registering the water that came to her eyes, the hurt his rejection caused her. He would wash out his pants in the brook, and be damned to her!

She was just like his wife. His ex-wife. He had seen her through eight years of picking at childhood scabs. He had listened to her, soothed her, helped her all he could. He had suffered too, with her, for her, for himself. He had hoped it would all be worth it, that in time he would have joy in his marriage.

But when it was over, she had begun to make him miserable. She had done her best to treat him like a stranger. She had frozen him out. She had said that she no longer needed him.

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That she had grown beyond him.

She had taken their daughter, and she had left.

He had helped her clean out her septic tank, and she had rewarded him by dumping a bucket of shit over his head. And now Molly! Never again, never again would he expect reward for help. Not a mug of cider, not a smile, not ... not love, from a woman.

It was not far to the brook, too short a distance and a time for his nose to grow used to the stench that rose from his pant legs, for his soul to grow calm. He found the path and left the road hurriedly, walked briskly past the field, through the thicket and the woods, and past the field. He surveyed the pools and smiled. The trout were there indeed. They were, in fact, so many that it took him a while to find an empty pool in which to wash out his trousers.

While they soaked, he lit a fire beneath a low branch. When it was going well, he wrung out his pants and hung them to dry. Bare-legged then, he walked along the path, exploring the brook. There were plenty of trout. He could have all he wanted, all he could carry, and he would eat well this winter. He would come back that night.

He came to the clearing, still blighted, worse blighted. The wood stubble was gone. Now the ground was bare, nearly leafless even in autumn, worn as if by flood, cracked as if by drought or fire, dry and stony. The surrounding vegetation seemed to shrink away, its revulsion apparent in the lean of dry and broken stems. Oddly, a single tree grew in the middle of the clearing.

He circled that tree, examining it closely. It seemed healthy. There were buds on its twigs, and he could make out a few persistently clinging beech nuts. It seemed sturdy, and by its thickness it had been there many years. Why, he wondered, was it alone unaffected by whatever had blasted the soil around it? And why had he failed to notice it the last time he had passed this way?

He scanned the circle of the ground, and a circle it was. As near as he could tell, the tree sat in the precise center of the blighted zone. Was it a target? Or a source? And if so, if either, of what?

To one side he found a single intruding plant. A wild grape vine, withered by frost and, it seemed, by something else at its blackened tip, crossed from wood to clearing. Within the clearing, it bore a small cluster of gone-by grapes, the sour, purple kind called fox grapes.

He wondered, but his legs were cold. He shivered. He thought that by now his pants must be dry, or dry enough.

It lacked an hour of midnight when he returned. There was an old feed bag in his hand, and in it his net. When he unfolded it, he would hold an open-

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mouthed sack at the end of a three-foot handle. It was eminently suited for the task ahead, for it was still a week before the full moon, and there was not enough light for a spear.

His breath fogged in the darkness, and he was glad of his thick jacket. It was late, he was tired, and he felt the cold. His ears strained for footsteps in the brush, for voices in the distance, for the slam of a car door back at the road, for anything that suggested he might get caught. He was poaching, after all, out of season and with unsanctioned tools. He knew better, too. He was a college professor, wasn't he? But he had been raised not far from here, and his moral sense failed to jib at a little night-dipping. Too, his taste buds treasured fall-caught trout, legal or no.

The woods were not silent. There was the purling of water over the rocks, the rattling of branches in the breeze, a crackling that might have been a deer passing through a thicket, the small noises of the few small animals that were not abed or gone for the winter. There was a splash, and he started. He calmed himself deliberately, telling his pounding heart it was only a trout, leaping from one pool to another, or fending off a rival.

He unfolded the net, stepped softly onto a boulder beside a chute. He watched the swirling water, looking for the telltale bulge of a trout's back. He dipped the net into the pool, swept it with the current, felt it glance from solid flesh. He turned the sweep, and weight tugged at his hands. He raised the dripping net and grinned at his first fish. Six pounds, perhaps even seven. And there were plenty more.

He quit when he had a dozen in the sack. Not all were as big as his first, but he thought he had a generous forty pounds of trout for his freezer. He would enjoy them, every one, but he did wish he still had his family to share them with.

He had moved down the brook in his hunt, hopping from rock to rock, abandoning each pool when he frightened its occupants into hiding or flight. Now he hoisted the sack over his shoulder, net neatly folded and laid atop the fish, and stepped from stone to bank. He found the path and turned upstream again. He would have to be careful when he reached the road, he reminded himself. A warden might be prowling, headlights off. Fortunately, his clothes were dark and the woods were always near.

When he came to the clearing, he paused to shake and clear his head. He should have been in bed long since, but he did want the trout he carried. He glanced to the side. It was a mystery, how the ground stayed so bare when the air was full of falling leaves, how nothing grew there except the one lonely tree. He peered. Or was it so bare? He could make out blots of shadow scattered on the soil, leaves that must have fallen or blown since that afternoon.

He froze, suddenly watchful. He

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twitched his head from side to side, jumping his gaze from shadow to shadow. He backed slowly off the path into the inadequate concealment of an alder clump.

The woods had been quiet, but they had been alive with small noises. Now they were silent. No mice pattered through their runs beneath the leaves. No deer rattled twigs. It seemed that even the breeze had stilled and the brook had slowed its flow.

Why? There was something here that had not been here before. A warden? Maybe. Another poacher? Maybe. But why was there no sound of steps, of cloth brushing against leafless branches? He glanced at his watch. It was after midnight.

A shadow moved. Or did it only seem to move? He *was* tired, and he knew what waking dreams could be. He held his breath. It moved again, and a figure separated from it. It was tall and slender, clad in a soft, white gown of antique cut. It was beautiful and woman, and its beauty reminded him of his wife, of Molly, of all women at their bitterest. She was not at all an "it," though her face spoke volumes of disdain. She carried herself erect, her breasts thrust forward, her hips swayless, her belly flat. She was aloof, woman untouchable and isolate. She seemed a very goddess, though of what he could not guess.

He huddled among the alder stems as she stepped into the clearing. He watched as she gestured toward the ground-despoiling leaves, each gesture a languid wave, ending with an outthrust finger and a silent flare of light. Each leaf vanished in a puff of ash.

She paced her clearing, and he understood. She wanted no hint of green within her circuit, no reminder of life, even of life gone by. Or was that true? She paced near the grape vine and its shrunken offering. She gestured, but no finger pointed and no light flared. He thought he glimpsed the barest hint of a smile before she turned toward the tree.

He had thought he understood, but now he wondered. Mercy and humor had not lived in her face before she saw the vine, and they did not now. Cold and lovely, she faced the tree, arms and breasts lifted. She embraced the bark, and then, he thought, she merged with it, diffusing into the wood, donning the tree as she might a costume or a suit of armor.

She was a dryad, then. A dryad of the beech. A goddess, indeed. But she, or his dream, was gone now, and he did not linger. Once more shouldering his sack, he rose from the ground and stepped onto the path. He had to struggle not to run.

He left, hurriedly, but he also pondered what he thought he had seen. It was hard to believe, wholly beyond his modern context, but he had seen it. He had. Hadn't he? It was real, and it had been real for at least as long as the clearing had been dying. That meant two years, or more, and he thought of

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all the marriages that had turned sour in that time. Was she a plague for people as she was for leafy growth.

As he turned onto the deserted road, he guessed she was. Yet she had stayed her hand for a grape. Why? He doubted she loved anything but herself and her beech-tree home. Had she appreciated the fruit as a seeming offering.

Was there a lesson in that for him? His ex-wife was beyond any renewal of courting. As the goddess did with leaves, she had turned the love they had shared to ashes. Any peace offering, any mute bid for mercy or a smile, she would reject. And, in truth, he no longer wanted her.

But Molly? He stopped in the road before her house. The windows were blank panes of glass, lightless and dark. A wisp of smoke curled from the chimney, speaking of a fire smoldering against the night's chill. He liked her, he did. He thought she liked him. He smiled mirthlessly. And the bucket of sludge was behind them, not ahead.

He left the road. He stepped onto her drive, his feet crunching gravel. He walked to her porch and set down his sack. He thought a moment before pulling out his wallet and extracting an old receipt from the cleaner's. He took a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote, "No hard feelings, Molly." He signed it, "Stinky," and then he laid in on the top step. He took a trout from his sack and used it to weight down the note.

Refreshed, he whistled softly the rest of the way home. He had no thought for wardens, and they none for him.

Coming soon

Next month: featured are two compelling and unusual novelets — "Slow Birds," an SF tale by **Ian Watson** and "Down Among the Dead Men," a fantasy story by **Gardner Dozois** and **Jack Dann.** Also, new stories by **R. Bretnor, Gene Wolfe** and others.

The June issue is on sale May 3.

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In this new Kedrigern story, the necromancer and his Princess decide to attend a convention. You would think that a convention of wizards would be more civilized than, say, a convention of SF fans. You would be wrong.

Welcome To Wizcon

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

The air was clear, heady as wine, with a slight nip of wintry chill at morning that softened to a dozy summery warmth in early afternoon. Kedrigern reclined on a cushioned bench in his front yard, sheltered from the breeze. A book lay at his side. His face was upturned to the autumn sun; his eyes were closed; a sleepy half-smile was on his lips.

Fall had long been Kedrigern's favorite season, and this fall promised to be the best ever. Princess had her voice restored at last. They were entertaining now and then — though it was difficult to put together a good dinner party in this isolated spot — and would soon be going south for the winter. It would be good to get away from the cold, the snow, and the barbarians for a time. There were just a few weeks' work to be tidied up here, then the packing, and then they would be off to the sun-lit lands.

A soft fluttering of wings broke Kedrigern's reverie. He opened his eyes a slit and saw, to his surprise, a pair of doves settling on the toes of his slippers, holding a broad golden ribbon in their beaks. He raised a hand slowly, so as not to frighten the timid birds, and rubbed his eyes. Something was written on the ribbon. Shielding his eyes from the glare of the low-lying sun, Kedrigern read the message printed in big red letters:

WIZCON WELCOMES WONDERFUL WISE WIZARDS

The doves spread their wings and flew off, trailing their message, and Kedrigern watched, smiling. A soft footfall made him turn, and he saw Princess standing close by, a hand shading her eyes, peering after the doves.

"Anything important, Keddie?" she asked.

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"Just a reminder about Wizcon, my dear. The committee is promoting it very aggressively."

"Are you sure you don't want to go?"

"Quite sure. I'd much rather be seated on a sunny hillside, looking out over the sea and drinking red wine, just the two of us, than putting up with noise and crowds and sour beer."

She laid a hand gently on his shoulder. "As long as it's your choice, election, and volition, Keddie, I'm happy. I know you've passed up the last few Wizcons to stay with me, and I appreciate it. But if you want to go this year, I'm willing."

He took her hand and drew her down beside him, where he could look at her without twisting his neck. She wore a smooth gown of dark green. Her glistening black hair was plaited in a single long braid, tied with red and gold ribbons, and a simple gold circlet ringed her brow. Princess was a beautiful woman, and the thought of showing her off was a tempting one; particularly tempting now that she could speak with a voice befitting her appearance.

But Wizcon meant crowds. There would be colleagues and friends among them, guild members he knew by name and reputation but had never met, old companions too long unseen: all this was true. But crowds are crowds. Even nice crowds are still crowds, and Kedrigern found crowds unsettling.

If the crowding were not enough to discourage him, he had only to think of the horror of accommodations. At this late date it would impossible to get a decent room, and the price of even a hovel would be exorbitant.

And then there was the traveling. Kedrigern disliked travel almost as much as he disliked crowds. It had taken him months to steel himself for the coming trip south with Princess. That trip, at least, would lead to repose, with no mob waiting at journey's end.

With a sigh, he said, "No, my dear. We might have a bit of fun at Wizcon, but we'd only end up going south exhausted. I'd sooner stay home and work out the counterspell against night visitations. I've promised it to Bremborn by the solstice."

"As you wish, Keddie. Are you ready for lunch?" Princess asked.

"I'm starving. This autumn air gives one an appetite. Why don't we take lunch out here?"

Princess gladly accepted the suggestion, and he picked up a dainty silver bell and rang it lightly. As he waited for the house-troll to appear, Kedrigern slipped his hand inside his tunic and placed his fingertips on the medallion that hung around his neck. His expression became thoughtful.

Spot came bounding into view on huge flopping feet, ears and hands waving wildly in the speed of passage. "Yah, yah!" the little creature cried, bouncing up and down eagerly.

Absently, as if his mind were busy elsewhere, Kedrigern said, "We will have lunch out here, Spot. But stay a

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moment before you bring it."

"Is something wrong, Keddie?" Princess asked.

"We're going to have company. A member of the guild, I think. Can't imagine why anyone from the guild would be visiting us, though."

"It must be important."

"Yah?" Spot inquired.

"Be patient, Spot. I'll tell you when," Kedrigern said. He drew out the medallion, and raising it to his eye he peered through the small hole at its center, the Aperture of True Vision. He looked around, then upward, and fixed his gaze on a distant speck in the sky. "It's Tristaver!" he cried. "Spot, bring an extra vessel. And more cheese. And fill the large pitcher."

The troll went careening off, and Kedrigern explained to his wife, "Tristaver's always been good at shape-changing. He loves to have an excuse to fly."

"Can he really become a bird? It must be wonderful!"

"It's not that difficult, really. I did it myself, a few times, when I was starting out. It's the fastest way to travel, if you don't get airsick. I wonder what brings him here...."

A small falcon circled overhead. Kedrigern waved, and the bird answered with a piercing cry and shot off to disappear in the nearby woods.

"Tris will be joining us directly. He's shy about having people see him land. He's always been a bit clumsy," Kedrigern said.

"Why does he turn himself into a merlin? Wouldn't a peregrine be faster?"

Kedrigern shrugged. "Just sentimental, I guess."

Spot arrived with a silver tray on which stood a brimming, frost-coated pitcher, three tankards, and a generous platter of dark bread and soft pale cheese. As the little troll departed, a short, stocky figure emerged from the trees, brushing himself off furiously. He waved to Kedrigern and Princess, and started toward them with rapid strides. Kedrigern rose to greet him.

"Tris, how are you? It's been a long time!" he said heartily.

"Too long, Keddie!" the other wizard replied, throwing his arm around Kedrigern's shoulder. "Everyone's asking for you. I must say, you look well. And is this Princess?"

"I'm happy to meet you, Master Tristaver," Princess said, extending her hand.

"And such a lovely voice! Oh, Keddie, I'm so pleased for you both. I had heard ... Conhoon mentioned something ... about a ... croaking problem...." said Tristaver uncomfortably.

"It's all taken care of. Well, come, sit down and join us for lunch, Tris. What brings you here?"

"Oh ... a few of us were talking the other night, and your name came up. That affair at Castle Grodzik, you know. Everyone's impressed with the way you handled Grodz. Well, I realized how long it's been since I saw you, so I decided to fly down first chance I

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had. Thank you," Tristaver said, taking the foam-capped tankard Kedrigern passed to him.

"Actually, it was Princess who put the spell on Grodz," said Kedrigern.

"But I learned it from you, dear," she said sweetly, laying her hand on his.

"Well, we're proud of you both. It's so good to have this little visit, and a chance to chat."

"So it's purely a social call. I see," Kedrigern said, intently filling a tankard.

Tristaver smiled, but did not respond. Instead, he toasted Princess, and then Kedrigern, and after refilling his tankard and breaking off a bit of bread he turned to the subject of the guild to which he and Kedrigern belonged. He spoke of old friends and old times, and Kedrigern joined in the reminiscences, adding memories of his own.

"You're popular still, Keddie," Tristaver said. "I never speak with other guild members but they ask what's become of you."

Kedrigern gave a little self-deprecating laugh. Waving off the remark with a gesture, he refilled his tankard. Princess, looking on in silence, could sense his pleasure at their visitor's words.

"I mean it sincerely. You really ought to be more active in guild affairs. We need people like you. Especially now," Tristaver said earnestly.

"I've done my share, Tris."

"No one can deny that. Still, it's been a good many years. You must miss it sometimes. The involvement ... the sense of being in touch with events ... that feeling of using your abilities to the full, of being challenged...."

"I don't think about it anymore, Tris," Kedrigern said cheerfully. "I still pay my dues, and I support the guild, but this is the life I prefer."

"You're not still angry over that Quintrindus business, are you? Everyone admits that you were absolutely right, and the rest of us—"

"Let's just drop the whole thing, Tris."

"Of course, of course, Keddie. Anything you like. Only..."

Kedrigern sighed and nodded. "Only the guild wants something and it's your job to ask for it. Am I right?"

"Actually, it's a very small favor. A matter of few days' time, and no effort at all. Probably a bit of fun, in the bargain. You see, Hithernils has disappeared."

"I knew that was going to happen," Kedrigern said. "He told everyone in creation where he kept the guild's treasury. Some barbarian must have—"

"No, no, no, it was nothing like that," Tristaver broke in. "No barbarians. Hithernils is perfectly safe. He's at home now, in his study."

"You said he disappeared."

"He did, Keddie. He's invisible."

Kedrigern stared at him for a moment, then softly asked, "How?"

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"Someone on the Wizcon program committee asked Hithernils if he knew anyone in the guild who might be willing to offer a workshop in invisibility. Well, you know Hithernils."

Kedrigern, faintly smiling, nodded eagerly, and gave a low involuntary chuckle of anticipation. Tristaver was primly silent until his host urged him on.

"Hithernils doesn't know any more about invisibility than I know about chiromancy, but he loves an audience. So he gave them his own name, and then he went madly to work to learn something about invisibility spells. It seems he got one wrong."

Kedrigern gazed at his visitor for a moment, then he gave a whoop and doubled over, helpless with laughter. Princess and Tristaver looked on, exchanging awkward little smiles, as he struggled to regain his composure. The process took some time. At last, with one final snort of laughter and a backhanded swipe at his tear-filled eyes, Kedrigern managed to ask, "And the guild wants me to work a counterspell, is that it?"

Tristaver leaned back, pursed his lips, and gazed off thoughtfully into the forest. "Well, actually, Kedrigern ... no. It's the sense of the guild that Hithernils might benefit, in the long run, from this experience. We don't think it should end too soon."

"What do you want from me, then?"

"We wondered if you'd be willing to replace Hithernils at Wizcon. The program committee would love to have a panel discussion on counterspells, and you're the obvious choice to chair it."

Kedrigern frowned and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I don't know, Tris. We hadn't planned on attending. Couldn't I just make Hithernils visible again?"

"That might make him feel better, but it wouldn't do much for the guild. The Wizcon people expect us to send a representative, and even if Hithernils were visible, he wouldn't dare to show his face now. You know conventions, Keddie. The mood is very..." Tristaver paused, and then, as if he had chosen the word with great care in order to convey a multitude of sordid implications, said, "*Playful.* Once word gets around of his unfortunate accident ... oh, no, Hithernils would never do. That's painfully apparent."

"A lot more apparent than Hithernils," Kedrigern said, grinning broadly.

"Quite so. Will you do it, for the guild?"

"Well ... You see, Princess and I were planning a little trip...."

"I'll go to Wizcon, if you like," she said quickly.

"Don't you want to think it over?" Kedrigern asked. He felt trapped.

"I'm sure it would be great fun. You could bring together all your recent work on counterspells," she said.

Tristaver added, "And, of course,

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you'd both be honored guests of Wizcon. And you'd stay in the suite Hithernils reserved for himself."

"A suite?"

"Anyone who represents the guild ought to make a good showing. Can't have legendary wizards sleeping six to a bed in some fleabag. Besides, it's already paid for and the inn won't refund the money."

"All right, then, Tris. We'll go," Kedrigern said, rising and extending his hand.

Kedrigern sat on the big lumpy bed, sulking. Princess seemed oblivious to his mood as she bustled about the room, humming a merry tune. She had deloused and defleaed the entire wing with a short-term spell, and was now engaged in more commonplace domestic undertakings. Here she arranged wildflowers in a chipped vase; there she shifted a threadbare doily. She plumped the cushions on the big benches by the fireplace, checked the water level in the fire buckets, tested the rushes on the floor for springiness. Her housekeeping done, she stood before the window, hands on her hips, and surveyed the room with a satisfied look.

"I don't want to give a party," said Kedrigern for the twentieth time.

"Of course you do," Princess said absently, looking into the adjoining room.

"No, I don't."

"Keddie, the guild has provided us with this nice big suite. Don't you think we'd be terribly selfish not-to let other people enjoy it?"

"I'll enjoy it a lot more if it isn't jammed full of strangers."

"Just leave it to me, Keddie. I'll invite a few people — the really interesting ones that I know you'll want to talk with — and we'll have a civilized evening."

Kedrigern sprang from the bed with a cry of "Aha!" Striking a pose, he said dramatically, "You think you can have a nice cozy party — a civilized evening — at a convention? You've never been to one of these, my dear. You don't know what the parties are like. Loud singing, everyone shouting back and forth... crowds ... pushing ... and the spells!"

"What's wrong with spells? After all, it's a wizards' convention," said Princess complacently, smoothing the rumpled coverlet.

"There's nothing wrong with spells. But when people get into a party mood and then start showing off, there's bound to be trouble. At the convention in Gryphon Rock, for example, the help at the inn were surly, and someone turned them all into pigs. Believe me, there was a lot of explaining to do when *that* got out. And just a few years ago, at Chateau Ravet—"

"All right, Keddie, I believe you," Princess said, raising her hands to silence him. "But just because there's been some rowdy behavior in the past, we needn't tolerate it here."

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"I'm talking about the present, my dear. Probably the future, as well, unfortunately. There's a whole new element in the profession these days — a lot of loud, pushy types who are more interested in flashy magic than in the good old-fashioned spells and enchantments. They're a lot of spoiled kids who haven't even bothered to learn their basic spells. Some of them can barely spell at all. It's disgraceful. This new lot wouldn't even make good alchemists," said Kedrigern hotly.

"We'll just set a respectable tone, and people will have to behave themselves."

"Ordinarily, that might work. But this is Wizcon."

Princess drew herself up. Her blue eyes flashed, and she said with a hauteur that would have snuffed the flame of an angry dragon, "*This* may be Wizcon, but *you* are a respected senior wizard, representing the oldest guild in the west. And *I* am a princess. There will be no rowdyism."

Kedrigern sensed that the last words on this particular topic had been spoken. He nodded, and said not a word more.

Princess was mollified. She smiled and said, "Good. It's getting late. Pull your boots on, so we can go to dinner. You have to prepare your remarks for tomorrow, and you'll want a decent night's sleep."

As he tugged his boots on, Kedrigern muttered, "I'd better get my sleep tonight. Won't get a wink of it tomorrow night, not with a mob carousing through here until dawn. We'll go home looking like something dragged out of a necromancer's rubbish heap."

"Don't be moody. You might at least try to have a good time," said Princess patiently.

Kedrigern sighed. He knew that he was being selfish; even a bit childish. He knew that Princess enjoyed giving parties, and that there was no opportunity for her to give them at home, and that this would make her very happy. He knew that it would be a good thing for the guild if everyone went home from Wizcon talking about what splendid hosts those wizards were. He even suspected that despite all his determination to the contrary, he might have a fine time.

All the same, he hated noise and crowds.

About a dozen people were seated in the dining room. Kedrigern did not recognize a single one. They looked up as he and Princess entered, and their gazes lingered appreciatively on Princess. She was resplendent in a close-fitting pale green gown, with a cloak of dark green thrown over her shoulders. Kedrigern, clean-shaven, in nondescript tunic and trousers of homespun stuff, was given scarcely a glance. He found a corner table, small but relatively steady and less greasy than the rest, and they seated themselves.

"Probably not a wizard in the lot. I certainly don't see anyone who looks

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like a wizard," Kedrigern said morosely.

"You don't look like a wizard yourself," Princess pointed out.

"Well, of course not. It's just asking for trouble to go around looking like a wizard these days."

"Then why should other people do it?"

Kedrigern grunted, mumbled something, and took to staring at the tabletop. They dined well on grilled carp, mutton, and pheasant, plenty of fresh bread, fine ripe pears for dessert, and a good ale to wash it all down. The meal left Kedrigern in much better spirits. He and Princess were smiling at one another before they reached the dessert.

"You'll have a wonderful time tomorrow night," Princess said, laying her hand on his for reassurance.

"I suppose so. It's so long since I've been to a party that I've lost all taste for them," Kedrigern said listlessly.

Princess patted his hand. "You leave it all up to me."

They left the dining room, which was a bit more crowded now as the late arrivals hurried to dine before the best food was gone. A low buzz of subdued conversation filled the air, louder as they stepped into the busy hall. Baggage was piled haphazard, and little groups stood about in lively dialogue. A number of people were standing near the stairway, and as he passed, Kedrigern heard "Party in Grollo's room ... everyone invited ... see you there ... tell the others," spoken contrapuntally by a quartet of eager voices. Before he could comment triumphantly on this to Princess, a young man dashed up and stopped before them.

"I beg your pardon — are you Master Kedrigern? The wizard of Silent Thunder Mountain?" he asked shyly.

"I am he," Kedrigern replied.

"Are you representing the guild, Master Kedrigern? I'm on the committee. We were told there'd be a replacement for Master Hithernils. I understand he had some sort of accident."

"Yes, my wife and I are here for the guild."

"This is really exciting for us, Master Kedrigern! We've heard so much about you — your defeat of Buroc is a legend!"

A very pretty girl took Kedrigern's arm. "And the way you handled Fingard — that was the most courageous deed I've ever heard of!" she said.

"Fingard wasn't so terrible," Kedrigern said coolly.

"He was a fire-breathing dragon! And he was injured!" the girl said.

"You just have to show them who's master," Kedrigern said, smiling wisely.

"And Grodz — is it true you turned Grodz into a toad?" she asked eagerly.

"No, it was my wife who did that. Princess, would you—"

"No one else saw through Quintrindus's machinations. He fooled the whole guild, except for you. Isn't that

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so, Master Kedrigern?" broke in a thin, intense young man at his other side.

"Well ... Quintrindus was a very subtle man. He's deceived a great many people," Kedrigern said.

"But not you, master," the girl said.

"No, not me," Kedrigern replied with an easy shrug and a smile.

"Master Kedrigern, I know you have an early panel, but if you could spare a bit of time, we're having a little party tonight, and—" the first young man began.

Princess's firm voice broke in, and her grip closed on Kedrigern's free arm. "We're terribly sorry, but Master Kedrigern has a lot of work to do for the panel, and he simply must have a good night's sleep," she said, sounding very much like the keeper of a harmless absentminded invalid. "If you'll excuse us, we'd best be getting back to our rooms."

"Maybe tomorrow night...?"

"We'll be hosting the guild party tomorrow night. I hope you'll all be able to come," Kedrigern blurted. "In our suite. Everyone will be there." His voice rose on the last word, as Princess's nails dug into his biceps.

As they entered the suite, Princess said in a tight voice, "For a man who's lost all taste for parties, you're certainly a genial host."

"They seem like such nice people," Kedrigern said guilelessly. "Not the kind of riffraff that trails around after alchemists. Nice decent folks." He paused, and when no response came, he said, "Do you know, my dear, it might be a gracious gesture if we dropped in on their ... party...."

Princess looked at him icily, and said nothing. He scratched his chin, cleared his throat, and said, "Ah, well, I think I'd better work on my opening remarks."

The panel went smoothly, all things considered. Only one panelist was totally incoherent, and he mumbled so low that no one in the audience could make out what he was saying. The others were well-spoken, witty, and in good rapport with the sizable audience.

The only sour note of the morning's proceedings was the behavior of a short, pudgy, obstreperous man who kept interrupting the panelists with flatulent monologues thinly disguised as questions. After the man's fourth turgid display, Kedrigern ignored his wildly waving hand and peremptory cries for recognition, and the rest of the session was quite decorous.

Afterwards, one of his fellow panelists, a lean, swarthy sorcerer from the East named Abrazoul, complimented Kedrigern on his handling of the noisy man, remarking that the fellow had all the manners of an alchemist.

"He did, didn't he?" Kedrigern replied. "I wonder if any alchemists are here."

"I'm sure there are a few. They want to see what they can steal from us," said Abrazoul.

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A third panelist, Jaquinta, doyenne of the Southern sorceresses, brushed back a lock of snowy hair and laughed contemptuously. "It would be like a monkey stealing an astrolabe. He might take it, but he would never learn to use it properly."

"Well put, Jaquinta," said Abrazoul.

"Yes, very well put. By the way I hope you'll both be able to come to the party in our suite this evening. It should be starting just about moonrise, so if you—"

"Oh, I've received an invitation already," said Jaquinta.

"So have I. It was slipped under my door this morning," Abrazoul said.

"So that's what she was doing," Kedrigern murmured.

"I'm curious, Kedrigern: why didn't you have Princess speak at the panel this morning? She would have been a sensation," Jaquinta said.

"She's a bit reluctant to talk about it. After all, she spent a good part of her life sitting in a bog, snapping at flies, worrying about storks and snakes and cruel boys. She wants to put all that behind her."

"I understand perfectly," Jaquinta said, patting his hand most maternally. "I do look forward to meeting her."

"I promise you will, Jaquinta. And you, too, Abrazoul. She really loves company, and she's been looking forward to this evening. It will be the biggest social event in our lives for years, I'm sure."

* * *

Kedrigern passed a pleasant day exchanging news and gossip with old friends and meeting several people he had long hoped to meet. A hurried note from Princess urged him to dine without her, as she was still busy preparing for the party. He dined with Abrazoul, the three committee members he had met the previous evening, and two amusing young conjurers.

Dinner was delightful, and they lingered long at table. It was close to moonrise when Kedrigern at last returned to his suite, in high spirits, whistling an elvish laughing-song. He found the rooms metamorphosed and Princess looking her most beautiful.

Flowers were everywhere, filling the suite with their fragrance. Lantern-glow and candlelight glinted off freshly polished wooden surfaces, and a fire sent highlights and shadows dancing in pursuit of one another. Near one wall stood a table on which were two kegs of ale, an assortment of stone jars containing more potent spirits, and enough mugs and tankards for everyone at Wizcon.

"Well?" said Princess expectantly.

Kedrigern took her hand and raised it to his lips. "My dear, you're a wonder. I must apologize for my peevish obstructionism. I should have known all along that you'd do everything to perfection."

"That's very sweet of you, Keddie."

"And you look absolutely marvelous, my dear! One would think that af-

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ter working so hard all day..." He stepped back to admire her green and yellow robe, her glistening high-piled hair bound by the golden circlet. "Simply beautiful," he said reverently.

"Just a small spell here and there, Keddie. The staff did all the heavy lifting. They were very helpful. If it hadn't been for them, I'd have—"

Three sharp knocks at the door announced the first arrivals. They were soon followed by others, and still others. Before the moon was above the treetops, the room was filled with people, and the air was thick with talk and laughter.

There were wizards from all parts of the known world; there were sorcerers and magicians, witches and warlocks, conjurors and seers; there were young followers of the subtle arts who studied everything available about the subject and took eager advantage of this chance to meet the masters in person. Kedrigern found their interest stimulating, even though the comprehensiveness of their knowledge was a bit overwhelming.

Kedrigern dutifully circulated among the eddies of conversation. He came to a rest with a trio of students from Rottingen, who were discussing the Iron Man that had made the university city famous.

"It's run by clockwork, isn't it?" he inquired.

"Correct, Master Kedrigern. When it's fully wound, it can do the work of six men in one day," said a red-haired girl.

"That's quite a lot. Does it do much work in Rottingen?"

"Unfortunately, it takes eight men two days to get it fully wound, so it's not very practical," a young man said morosely.

A second young man added, "But the inventor is working on a second Iron Man. When it's done, they can wind each other."

Kedrigern paused for a thoughtful moment, then nodded. "I see," he said. "Most ingenious."

"The main problem is rust," the girl said. "After a day of rain, the Iron Man of Rottingen is a bright orange."

"In Rottingen, we have a nickname for it," the second young man said. "We call it—"

"Oh, dear," Kedrigern broke in at the sight of a new arrival and her entourage. "I'm terribly sorry, but I must see someone right away," he said, working his way through the crowd.

The wood-witch stood just inside the doorway, looking around the room with a muzzy grin and slightly glazed eyes. Two of the staff were at her side, straining under their burden of a huge stone jar which they bore between them on a litter.

"Keddie, me love!" she shrieked at the sight of her host, and gave a wild cackle of glee that silenced the other partygoers in an instant. "You're throwing a party! Bloody miracle, that's what I calls it!"

"Hello, Bess. It's good to—" Kedrigern began, but was silenced by her

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strenuous hug and the wet kiss she loudly planted on his cheek.

"Now, where's Princess, Keddie, so's old Bess can thank her proper for the invitation? I know this is all her doing. You're a proper hermit, *you* are."

Princess glided to their side, aglow with the success of her party. "You must be Bess, the wood-witch," she said, giving the newcomer's ruddy cheek a quick peck. "Kedrigern's told me so much about you."

"Has he, now? Well, the worse it sounds, the truer it is, love," said Bess. She brushed back a loose, lank strand of hair and gave another unearthly laugh.

"We're so glad you could make it," Princess said gamely.

"It was good of you to invite old Bess, after all the trouble you had with that bloody old crystal I sold to Keddie. I feel terrible about that, love."

"Now don't give it another thought. You're here to enjoy yourself," Princess said.

"Just to help things along, I brought a jar of me best. 'Old Fenny Snake,' I calls it," said Bess. With surprising deftness, she plucked an empty mug from the hand of a conjurer and with a deft backhanded plunge, dipped a sample from the stone jug. "Here, now, you lads get that over to the table so's people can get their mugs into it," she ordered the two bearers. Turning to Princess, she extended the mug and said, "Have a sip, love. It'll do you good. Give you curly teeth and nice white hair, it will," and laughed once more.

Princess unsuspectingly raised the mug while Kedrigern, torn between politeness and solicitude for his wife's well-being, looked on anxiously. At the first whiff of bouquet, Princess's head snapped back; her eyes crossed and began to water profusely; she took two unsteady steps backward, gasping for breath. Kedrigern snatched the mug from her trembling hands, lest it spill on her dress and eat through to burn the skin.

"My wife never drinks anything stronger than wine," he explained, putting his arm around Princess to support her.

"Sorry, love," said Bess, rubbing Princess's hand vigorously. "I keeps forgetting that it's an acquired taste."

Princess gasped, coughed, and tried to speak, but could manage only a strangulated squeak. Kedrigern helped her outside, where they walked for a time in the cool night air. Before long, her voice returned, and Kedrigern was surprised by her first words.

"You drank that stuff once — for my sake," she said.

"I did, my dear."

"And I was so unkind the next day, when you could barely move."

"That's all right, my dear. As I recall, I botched things up a bit that day."

"I'm amazed that you could even stand."

They walked in the moonlight for a

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time, silent, then Kedrigern said, "I think we'd be wise to get back inside. Don't want to leave our guests on their own for too long."

"There's no hurry, Keddie. Everyone's behaving very well."

"They were before we had a jar of Old Fenny Snake on the premises. By now, they may all be behaving like lunatics."

Princess glanced at him apprehensively. Without another word, they hurried inside.

The atmosphere in the suite was subtly different. No one was actually sprawled prostrate on the floor, or swinging from the beams, but the mood was somehow more conducive to such activity. Kedrigern checked the contents of the stone jar and found, to his horror, that it was nearly empty. He knew that the danger point was near. He hoped it had not been passed.

As he stood by the jar, trying to decide what to do first, an arm went around his shoulder and a numbing breath assailed him. It was the noisy little man of this morning, and he was well on the way to oblivion.

"Din have a chance t'introduce myself 's morning," he said thickly. "Name's Smarmax. Doctor Smarmax, Al. D., Univers'y of Umleitung."

"I do hope we'll have a chance to chat one of these days," Kedrigern said, taking Smarmax's arm and steering him toward the door. Here was a beginning.

He eased out a reeling conjurer and a trio of young men who had just begun singing very indecent songs, and then his attention was caught by loud voices at the center of the room.

"I know your type. You don't do any magic all year long, then you come here and try to pass yourself off as a big wizard. You're a phony!" one cried.

"Listen to boy conjurer," a second voice said scornfully in a thick accent. "Check record, sonny — four spells and five counterspells last year I did, and am now working on seven-spell contract with local margrave."

"Wimp wizard!"

"Creep conjurer!"

"You couldn't spell your way out of a gunny sack!"

"Have never had to, creep. Am not dumb enough to getting into gunny sack in first places," the second speaker said. Suddenly there was a muffled cry, followed by a whoop of triumphant laughter. Kedrigern pushed through the crowd in time to see a large gunny sack thrash about on the floor, then disappear. A stocky young man, dark-eyed and beetle-browed, his thick features scarlet with rage, jumped to his feet.

"All right, creep — you sneak-spell me, I show you what real wizard can do to punk wimp phony," he said, gesturing at the one who stood opposite him, laughing.

The conjurer dodged. An elderly magician standing behind him, deep in conversation with a hooded seeress,

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suddenly sprouted a huge pair of antlers. The conjurer, meanwhile, made a complicated figure in the air, and the wizard roared in pain as a beehive materialized in his pants. The magician, realizing his altered state, turned, and the seeress stepped to his side. Their faces were ominous.

Kedrigern worked a quick short-term immunity for himself preparatory to stepping in and putting things to rights. As he said the last phrase, Princess appeared, hands raised, at the center of the four figures. "That will be quite enough! I insist—" she declared.

Then she was gone.

"You bloody lot of nits! Look what you've gone and done to Princess!" Bess the wood-witch shrieked in a bloodcurdling voice. The conjurer and the wizard disappeared as completely as Princess had. The antlered magician and his hooded companion, their vengeance thwarted, turned on Bess menacingly, and Kedrigern quickly turned them to stone.

The remaining guests departed hastily. Kedrigern was left with Bess and two lifelike stone figures.

"What happened to Princess, Bess? Did you see?" he asked.

"One of them silly amateurs hit her with a spell when she stepped in between them. Maybe they both got her. Anyway, old Bess fixed them. Turned them into flies, I did."

"Thanks, Bess."

"The least I could do, Keddie. I'm the one who should be thanking. Old Antlers and his lady friend were about to do me in."

"I think it was just a nervous reaction."

"Probably was. They had a few drops of Old Fenny Snake in them, Keddie. That makes some people jumpy."

Kedrigern nodded, thinking that it was probably all to the good. When the magician and the seeress awoke from his spell next morning, they would remember nothing. Neither would the rest of the guests, in all likelihood. Old Fenny Snake did that to people.

"I botched it, didn't I, Keddie?"

"What?"

"Old Bess botched it. Brought along a jar of her best, and spoiled your lovely party," the wood-witch said. A tear trickled down her puffy red cheek.

"Don't go blaming yourself, Bess."

"Old Bess always does it," she wailed. "Never learns her lesson, not Old Bess. There's some as can handle Old Fenny Snake and some as can't, and I keeps running into the second category everywhere I goes." She sniffed and wiped her eyes on a grimy sleeve.

"There, there, Bess," Kedrigern said, giving her a consoling hug. "We don't want to think about that now. What we have to do is find Princess."

"And it's about time, too," said a tiny voice.

"Princess! Where are you, my love?"

"Where I won't be squashed by

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anyone's clumsy feet. Is it safe to come out?"

"There's only Bess and I, dear."

"And two statues," Bess added. "They won't hurt you, love."

From behind an overturned stool near the fireplace hopped an elegant little green toad with a tiny gold circlet on its head. Kedrigern covered his eyes, shook his head, and groaned, "Oh, dear me."

"Stop moaning and give me a hand," the wee voice said angrily.

Kedrigern stooped and extended his hand. Princess hopped to his palm, and he raised her to eye level. She was a very attractive toad, as toads go.

"The important thing is not to get excited, my dear," said Kedrigern. "We can work this out. Everything will be all right."

"I'm *not* excited. I'm *very* calm. Just use that charm and get me back to human again as quick as you can."

"Charm, my dear?"

"The charm you used when we met, Keddie. Just do it one more time. Hurry."

"Ah. *That* charm. Yes. Well, you see, my dear, that was a one-time charm. As a rule, people stick with a form once they've got it back."

"Then get another charm!" said Princess, sounding a bit more excited.

"Of course. I'll have to find the young man who enchanted you, and learn what spell he used. I'm sure I have a counterspell for it. Bess will help us all she can."

"I will! Oh, I will, love!" Bess cried.

"Well, where is he? What did you do to him?"

"Did you say you turned them into flies, Bess?" Kedrigern inquired.

"I did. It was the first thing came to mind."

"Flies? Did you say *flies?!*" Princess shrilled.

"That's right, my dear. So all we have to do is—"

"Keddie, I ate them!"

"Ate them?" Kedrigern repeated numbly.

"All of a sudden I was a toad, and here were two fat flies buzzing right in front of me, practically asking to be eaten. So I ate them. It was instinctive."

"This may complicate things a bit."

"Oh, Keddie!" Princess lamented in her tiny voice.

"Now, my dear, be brave. We've been through worse than this," Kedrigern said gently.

"He's right, love. You've got to look on the bright side," Bess said.

"There isn't any bright side! I'm a toad again. I may be a toad forever!" Princess wailed.

"But you're still speaking, my dear."

"Beautiful voice she has, too," Bess added warmly. "Can you sing, love?"

In response to Bess's inquiry, Princess ran through the scale. It came out sounding a bit tinny, but it was undeniably singing.

"Well, now, you can speak and

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sing as well as ever. That'a a good sign. All we have to do is find out what spell was placed on you, and you'll be your old self in no time. And meanwhile, we can talk to one another just as if nothing had happened. You won't be going

about saying...." Kedrigern choked up and swallowed loudly. He could not make himself say the word.

"Brereep?" she said.

He nodded. "Brereep," he said.

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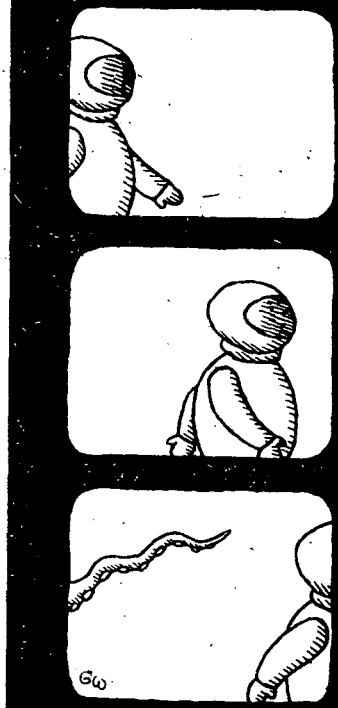
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE DARK CRYSTAL

I had begun to despair that Western film puppeteering would ever achieve the imaginative brilliance that the Czechs had displayed some twenty years ago, particularly in the works of Jiri Trnka; his *The Emperor's Nighingale* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* showed what heights of lovely visual fantasy the art could attain. But slowly the Muppet mob under Jim Henson has been moving in that direction; certain segments of The Muppet Show, of the films, even the Saturday Night Live sequences in the early days of that show indicated a grasp of large scale fantasy, as opposed to the pocket whimsy that puppets in films and on TV have represented up to now.

Now that potential has come to fruition with their latest film. The year 1982, which hit something of a low point with *E.T.*, *The Sound of Music* of science fiction film, has redeemed itself at the very last moment with *The Dark Crystal*. Like the crystal of the title, it is flawed, but its positive aspects are so wonderful that the flaws would have to be a great deal more sizable than they are to make this anything less than a memorable film.

My quibbles — and please keep in mind that they *are* but quibbles — have to do with the concepts; not the plot so much, but the ideas behind the created world that Henson has given us. It is a world of three suns, and a thousand years ago, when the three

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suns conjoined, we are told that two races appeared. The Skeksis are cruel and clever, the urRu slow and kindly. A conjunction of the suns is about to take place again, and Jen, last of the Gelflings (a race destroyed by the Skeksis), is told by the dying Master of the urRus that he must "heal the wound at the core of being." This can be accomplished by finding the missing shard of the Dark Crystal, a powerful artifact held by the Skeksis, and restoring it to the whole.

So, a quest, by the usual unlikely hero. And there are the necessary and inevitable aids and obstacles, leading to the inevitable climax as the three suns come together. The plot is one of classic simplicity, and the aids and obstacles (of which more below) are surprising, inventive, and thoroughly satisfying, as is the climax. And there is, as the basic situation reveals itself, a surprisingly sophisticated and original handling of the idea of good and evil, represented by the Skeksis and the urRus.

So what's bothering me? It is, I think, something basic to film itself, and that in contrast to literature. I simply did not feel this world in depth, and I really wanted to. In the best of literary fantasy (say, Tolkien), I would have; the author would have had the room to fill in (subtly and artfully, of course) the details of history and geography that would have made it three dimensional, as it were. But these are concepts best conveyed in words, and a film just can't do it, especially in the brief span allotted a movie. (One wonders at a series; the English have certainly done it with times alien to us in their historical series we've seen on Masterpiece Theater, and *Star Trek* did it in a way, with length and sheer accumulation of detail).

But the score for this quibble-by-contrast is certainly evened by the visual qualities of *The Dark Crystal.* Here is immediate fantasy incarnate, and experience no printed page could ever give us. Film puppetry proves to be able to create worlds as magical and mutable as those of animation, and a good deal more convincing (at least considering the present sorry state of animation). Here, of course, the reviewer-in-print runs into a wall of frustration. Witty lines I can quote, but, oh, gentle reader, how can I convey the visual wonders of this movie? The forests, where a myriad creatures, large and small, fly, bustle, and lumber about, bringing a surprise a second. The beautiful larger landscapes, under the three suns, through which the urRu toil on their way to the Castle of the Dark Crystal. The Castle itself, baroque and overwrought. And along with the rest of the audience, I went "a-a-a-ah" at the appearance of Aughra's orrery.

And there are the characters, whose impact is more than visual (due credit to a myriad wonderful voices). There is no way I can even begin to do justice to all of them, but I must single

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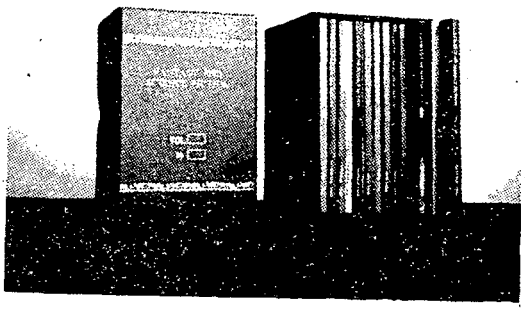
out Fizzgig, a sort of pet thing, who has one of the better entrances of all time and about whom I could say to my dog, Bran, that I'd finally seen someone with more fuzz, more teeth, and a greater talent for tantrums than even he.

Here, of course, homage must be paid to Brian Froud, a notable artist of fantasy, whose talent as "conceptual designer" added to that of the Muppet creators was responsible for these wonders.

The icing on the cake, though, was the laughs. (The senior critic for The New York Times, historically insensitive to fantasy, staggered me by commenting that the film had no wit or humor. I wonder what movie he saw?) The madness of the Muppets has been one of the few manifestations of true humor we've had in this dreary age of tiresome sitcoms, and they've carried through just enough in *The Dark Crystal* (verging, as usual, just on the edge of cuteness but never *quite* falling in). There's nothing spoils a visual joke so much as having it retold in words, and so I'll not ruin any of the good ones here for those unfortunates who haven't seen it. However, I think I can safely and obliquely say that the moment when the dessert gets away is one of the great moments of film.



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Luman had always hated to ask for directions — it was like a confession of weakness. Still, there were times when one had to ask, and this was definitely one of them. The problem was that no one would answer him...

On the Ship

BY

ANDREW WEINER

Gray. The ocean as seen through the window of the lounge was a great gray mass, overhung by a great gray sky. The ocean was calm, and still the ship rocked imperceptibly. ...

The ship.

What the hell, wondered Luman, am I doing on a ship?

He gripped the edge of the table in front of him, on which stood a half-drunk cup of coffee. Momentarily he closed his eyes. When he opened them again the scene was the same. Gray sky, gray ocean, an almost empty lounge, a half-drunk cup of coffee in front of him.

A waterfront café, he told himself. That's where I am. Although God only knows how I got there.

But even as he stood up he felt, very distinctly, the motion of the ship.

A restaurant ship, he thought. Moored down at the waterfront.

But as he crossed the lounge to the steps that presumably led to the deck, he felt the faint throb of distant engines beneath his feet.

How, he wondered, how could this have happened? Only moments ago he had been ... where? The memory stubbornly refused to come to him. But not here, certainly. Not here.

Memory lapse. Blackout. Had he been drinking? Surely not that heavily. He was a moderate drinker. Even in rare moments of excess he had never lost the sense of transition from place to place. ...

He reached the deck. It was chilly up there, and he shivered beneath the thin fabric of his summer suit. The deck was enormous. It stretched for hundreds of yards in each direction. It was not the deck of a restaurant ship. More like an ocean liner. And the ship was definitely in motion. As he rounded the corner of the bulkhead he could

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see that it was surrounded by ocean on all sides.

Despite the cold, he had begun to sweat. His heart was thundering in his chest. He gulped for air.

Sit down, he told himself. Sit down. Take stock. *Think.*

He sat down in a deck chair and stared out at the ocean.

Name, he thought. Dick Luman.

Occupation. Account executive, Progressive Public Relations Ltd.

Place of Residence. Toronto, Canada.

Marital status. Divorced.

Age. Forty-one.

Place of Birth. London, England.

Social Security Number. He could never remember his social security number.

Present location. Unknown.

Ask, he thought. Ask a policeman. Or somebody, anyway.

Incongruously he thought of his old and often repeated arguments with Carole. During vacation trips, or simply driving to unknown parts of the city. He had never like to ask for directions, no matter how hopelessly lost. It was as if to do so were somehow a confession of weakness. He much preferred to drive aimlessly for hours.

Carole, of course, had seen all this as typically *masculine,* although Luman had never quite seen the connection.

Still, there were times when one simply did have to ask. And this was one of them. No matter how idiotic it was going to sound. Reluctantly, Luman rose to his feet.

The deck was very nearly deserted. But scattered along its vast length were assorted individuals and couples. And, from very far away, he heard the laughter of a child. He thought, inevitably, of Melanie. His stomach churned.

He approached an elderly couple, huddled in blankets against the breeze.

"Excuse me," he said, then broke off, unsure how to continue.

"Yes?" asked the elderly gentleman. He looked to be in his late seventies, with a good head of gray hair and a British-looking moustache. His accent, too, was faintly British. He bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the schoolmasters of Luman's youth.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could tell me ... I know this sounds silly, but I seem to have forgotten where I am."

"Yes?" said the elderly gentleman again.

"Well," Luman said. "Could you please tell me? Where am I?"

The old man laughed. He nudged his companion, a small and equally elderly looking lady with blue-rinsed hair who appeared to be dozing quietly in the neighboring deck chair.

"This young man," he said, "doesn't know where he is."

He turned back to Luman. "You're on a ship, young man."

"I know *that,*" Luman said, barely containing his irritation. "I can see

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that. But what ship? Going where?"

"Details," said the old man. "The young are so obsessed with details. When you get to my age you realize, it's not the destination that matters, it's the journey. Take some time to smell the flowers, young man. That's my advice to you."

"There are no flowers," Luman said, no longer bothering to conceal his impatience. "And I am not a young man, I am forty-one years old. And I would appreciate it if you could answer my question."

The old lady turned to the old man. "I do believe," she said, "that this young man has amnesia. Like that poor woman in the car accident in 'General Hospital.' "

"Amnesia!" scoffed the old man. "Is that what they call it? Slovenliness, that's what I call it. Laziness, that's what it is, pure and simple. Look at me. Seventy-eight years old and I never forgot a thing. Why, I can still name you every boy I ever taught. Discipline, that's all it takes."

He peered at Luman. "Come to think of it, you look familiar to me. Class of '53. Gruman. Or Blumen? Yes, Bluman. Nasty little runt, you were. Always forgetting your homework, as I recall. Haven't changed much, have you?"

"Luman," he said. "My name is Luman. Did you teach at Hillcrest Grammar?"

"Fieldstone School," the old man said. "Forty years, man and boy."

"I never heard of Fieldstone," Luman said. "You must be mistaken." But the man *was* familiar. "What did you teach?"

"Fieldstone," the old man insisted. "Fieldstone, Latin, Class of '53."

"I never took Latin," Luman said. "And where is Fieldstone? I went to school in north London."

"South," the old man said. "South London, Fieldstone, Latin, Class of '53. Never forgot a name or a face. Think, boy. *Think*."

"Amnesiacs can't remember," the old lady said. "You can't expect them to. He's like that poor woman Ellen, on 'General Hospital.' She couldn't remember her name until she banged her head. ..."

She stared hard at Luman. "I think," she said, "that you should go and see the ship's doctor. I hear he's very nice."

"I don't want to see a doctor," Luman said. "I want to know what ship I'm on and where I'm going."

"Ah," the old man said. "You haven't changed, Bluman. Always in a hurry to get there sooner so you can come back again quicker."

"Where," Luman asked, through clenched teeth, "would I find the ship's purser?"

"Down those stairs, turn right and right again, second door on the left. Can't miss it," the old man said.

"Thank you," Luman said.

Ah, said the purser, rising from

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his desk and holding out his hand to shake, "Mr. Newman. And how are you enjoying the voyage? I hope everything is satisfactory. Afraid the weather is a bit dreary today, but things will soon be looking up."

"Luman," he said. "The name is Luman."

"Really?" said the purser. He shook his head. "Terribly silly of me." He pawed through the papers on his desk. "Ah," he said. "Newman, cabin 878. You can't trust these travel agents."

"Have we met?" Luman asked. "You seem to know me."

"Faces and names," the purser said. "I try to keep track of them. Good discipline you know. Although it's hard to keep track of so many passengers."

"How many?"

"This trip? Just a couple of hundred. Off-season, you know. But we can carry several thousand."

"This may sound strange," Luman said, "but I seem to have lost my memory. Or part of it, at least. I don't remember getting on this ship. I don't know where it's going. I don't even know its name."

The purser looked concerned. "That must be very distressing, Mr. Newman. I can imagine just how upsetting that would be."

"Luman," he corrected, automatically.

"Of course," the purser said. "In any case, we can't have you upset. It'll spoil your entire holiday. I'll just call our Dr. Phipps and see if he can squeeze you in."

"I don't want to see a doctor," Luman said. "I want to know where I'm going. I want to know the name of this ship."

The purser pondered. "Well, it would be simple enough for me to tell you. But I'm not sure how well advised it would be. It could be like waking up a sleepwalker. The shock, you know...." He gestured vaguely. "Not being experienced in such matters, I would rather leave that to Dr. Phipps."

Is this a dream, Luman wondered. Some awful, recurring bad dream from which I am soon going to awake? Maybe if I were to scream. ...

He clenched his fists.

"All right," he said. "I'll see your Dr. Phipps."

The ship's doctor was fat and bald and jolly-looking.

"Good morning, Mr. Newman," the doctor said, "and how are you today?"

"Luman," he said.

"Oh, really?" the doctor said. "Sorry about that. Must have been a bad connection with the purser's office."

He made a notation on the file in front of him.

"Now then," he said, "I see you're in advertising."

"Public relations," Luman said. "But close. How would you know where I work?"

"Oh, we have to have good records, you know, if we're going to take

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good care of our passengers. Now, advertising is a pretty stressful business, isn't it?"

"Public relations," Luman said. "Yes, I suppose it is. What about it?"

"I'm just trying to get to the root of your problem, Mr., ah—"

"Luman," Luman said. "And the root of my problem is that I don't know where I am."

"Exactly," said the doctor.

"So where am I?"

"Mr., ah, Luman, not knowing where you are is not the problem. It is merely the *symptom* of your problem, the overt manifestation, as it were. The question is not what you have forgotten but *why* you have forgotten. Tell me a little about your childhood, Mr. Luman."

"Are you a psychiatrist, Dr. Phipps?"

"I dabble a little," the doctor said, waving his hands in a gesture of self-deprecation. "You have to be a bit of a jack-of-all-trades to be a ship's doctor. Why, many is the time I've had to pull teeth. ..."

"If you're not a psychiatrist, Dr. Phipps, I don't believe that I care to discuss my childhood with you, or the stressful nature of my work. If you could just tell me where I am and where I'm going, I'm sure all the rest will come back to me."

"You're not being fair, Mr. Newman," the doctor said, petulantly. "I can't help you unless you're prepared to help yourself. Perhaps you could come back when you reach that point." He pressed the button on the intercom on his desk. "Next," he said.

He nodded, ponderously, towards the door.

Luman paced the floor of his cabin. A ship of fools, he thought. Doesn't anyone here make any sense?

The key to his cabin had been in his jacket pocket. And in the wardrobe of his cabin was a selection of his own clothing. He had obviously packed for a long trip. Except that he could not remember packing at all.

A notice on the door of the cabin itemized the ship's safety regulations. There was a menu for room service in the drawer of the desk. But neither document mentioned the name of the ship, or even of the shipping line. Neither had he discovered any identifying features on the ship's lifeboats on deck. It was, apparently, a ship without a name.

Moreover, every single person he had talked to on this nameless ship had been evasive on the subject of both the ship's name and its destination.

Something phony, he thought. Some sort of setup. But who would want to setup a middle-aged PR man, and to what purpose? And who would go to such extremes? No one would. It made no sense at all.

I'm dreaming, he thought. Or hallucinating. Or I really do have amnesia and I'm having a singularly bad run of luck. ...

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He left the cabin, in search of someone who would make some sense.

Emptiness. As Luman prowled the great ship the feeling of emptiness became overpowering. The few people he saw scattered here and there seemed dwarfed by the enormous size of it. Even the crew seemed to be skeletal. As he settled down for a drink in one of the ship's three bars, he noted that there was only one waiter on duty for a room that could easily seat 200. And yet the half a dozen patrons occupying this cavernous space were hardly enough to keep him occupied.

The elderly couple from the deck were seated at the far end of the room, and the lady made a motion, as if beckoning him to join them. He pretended not to see them, instead heading towards a woman seated alone at a booth by the wall.

She was attractive enough, in a brittle sort of way. Somewhere in her middle thirties, she had short blonde hair and dressed in what Luman recognized as the standard uniform of the corporate career woman: dark skirt and matching jacket, silk blouse, a single strand of pearls, no other jewelry, subdued makeup. She was familiar to Luman at least as type, and perhaps more familiar than that, but he could make no immediate connection. She reminded him of someone, perhaps.

Go carefully now, he told himself. Carefully.

"Would you mind if I joined you?"

She looked up, scrutinized him for a long moment.

"Not at all," she said.

He sat down, held out his hand to shake.

"Dick Luman," he said.

"Nancy Singer," she said, taking his hand and shaking it firmly. Her eyes seemed to show intelligence, perhaps interest, too. In any other time or place Luman might have been interested in her. But right now he had more pressing concerns.

"Miserable day," he said.

"Isn't it? But it should be warming up soon."

"When we reach the islands," Luman said.

She looked at him quizzically, but made no reply.

"Strange," he said, trying another tack, "how deserted this ship is. Almost spooky."

"In a way," she said, "I find it a pleasant change. From the city."

"You're from New York?" he guessed.

"Originally," she said. "But I've been living in Chicago for some years."

"I'm from Toronto," he said, "but I've been to Chicago. Very dynamic."

"And I've been to Toronto," she said. "A nice city. Very clean."

"Yes," he said. "Very clean."

The conversation was shaping up along predictable lines. Next, he thought: What were you doing in Chicago? What do you do? What were you doing in Toronto? And what do you do?

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"I suppose," he said quickly, "that this isn't a very popular cruise. This time of year."

"Or any time of year," she said, "I would think."

"Have you been on a cruise before?"

"Once," she said.

"I never have. In fact, I never had any desire to."

"Well, life is like that sometimes," she said. "Desire works in strange ways. And in the end you get what you wanted. Except that you never knew you wanted it."

Luman could make nothing of this speech.

"It's difficult," he said, "taking the time away from work."

She looked at him quizzically again.

"Oh," she said, "I'm sure they'll get along without you. Or me, for that matter. No one is indispensable, you know." She paused, seemed to study him again. "You look a little familiar," she said. "You said your name was Leeman?"

"Luman."

"We met, I think," she said. "At a sales convention in San Francisco. You're in marketing, aren't you?"

"Public relations," he said. "And I was never at a sales convention in San Francisco. Or any kind of convention. But I have been to San Francisco."

"Public relations," she echoed. "Strange. I was sure.... Public relations. Isn't that a rather dirty business?"

"Not particularly."

"I mean, don't you have to twist the truth a little?"

"A little. Sometimes more than a little." *We're worried about pollution, too,* he thought. *And we're working hard to solve it. ... Our accident record is spotless. ... We're plowing back our profits to build a stronger nation. ...*

"Don't you find that hard to live with?"

"Not particularly. It comes with the territory. To tell you the truth, I hardly think about it. There are lots of people who do much worse things than I do to make a buck."

"But is that really the point?"

I hope, Luman said, that she doesn't talk like this on her job. Because if she does she isn't going to get very far. ...

But that was hardly his concern. He tried to change the subject.

"We could have met," he said. "Perhaps I made a presentation to your company." He looked at her more closely. "Yes," he said. "I remember now. When I was with the New Jersey office. You're in computers, aren't you?"

"Video games," she said. "And I've never worked in New Jersey. But I'm fairly sure we did meet." She paused. "In fact, I think we fucked."

Luman flinched backwards, fumbled with his drink to cover his confusion.

"Tell me," she said. "Do you have a mole on your left shoulder?"

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"Right shoulder. And it's more like a birthmark."

"And you sing 'Great Balls of Fire' in the shower."

"I whistle in the shower, sometimes. Polkas, mostly."

"And you have your eggs soft-boiled, two minutes."

"Three minutes."

"I think it *was* you," she said.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "I can't seem to place you."

That was not, he realized, the right thing to say. But what was the right thing to say in a situation like this?

"You're married with one daughter."

"Divorced," he said. And then, after a pause, "She died. My daughter died."

"I'm very sorry," she said. She touched his arm. "How?"

"Drowned. We just turned our heads for a moment. ..."

"I'm very sorry," she said, again.

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Well," she said, finally, rising from the table. "Perhaps I'll see you at dinner."

"Just a minute," he said urgently. "There's something I didn't tell you. Something is the matter with my memory."

"Obviously," she said, a little coldly.

"I mean, I don't remember boarding this ship. I have no memory of it at all. I don't even know where we're going."

"How lucky for you," she said, leaving.

Yes, Mr. Newman?" asked the purser.

"I want to send a telegram," Luman said, not even bothering to correct the name. "To my employers."

"I'm terribly sorry," said the purser, "but we're having some problems with the radio equipment. We can't seem to send out any messages. But if you leave it with me, I'm sure that by tomorrow...."

"You're lying," Luman said, surprising himself with his own vehemence. "There's nothing the matter with the radio. What kind of ship is this, anyway?"

"A cruise ship, Mr. Newman."

"I want to see the captain," Luman said. "I demand to see the captain."

"The captain is a very busy man, Mr. Newman."

"I insist."

"I'll see what I can do," the purser said. He picked up the phone.

The bridge of the ship, also, was curiously deserted. Besides the captain there was only one other crewman, a pale-looking young man hardly more than seventeen or eighteen.

"There's just the two of you?" he asked.

"Oh, these days you hardly even need us, Mr. Ryman. It's all computers, you know. Not like when I was a boy."

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The captain had a neatly trimmed white beard and twinkling eyes, like a department store Santa. Unwillingly, Luman felt himself warming to him.

"Luman," he said. "That's my name. Although by now I'm beginning to doubt it."

"Sorry," the captain said. "Never was very good at names. Faces either, for that matter. Here today, gone tomorrow, you see. In any case, what can I do for you? The purser said you were most insistent on seeing me."

"I want off this ship, Captain. I want to be put off at the next port."

"A touch of cabin fever, eh? You'll soon get over that. That's the thing you have to get used to about sailing. Knowing you can't get off when you want to. Unless you want to swim, of course." He chortled.

"I'm sorry, I want to get off this ship."

"Your ticket is for the entire cruise, Mr. Luman. I don't have any authority to break your journey. Besides, we're not stopping until we get there."

"There?"

"Our destination, Mr. Luman," the captain said, with a hint of impatience. "You know, you're not the first person to want to get off this ship. Oh, dear me, no. There must have been hundreds in my time. But they came around. They all did, in time. Try and relax, Mr. Luman. Enjoy the cruise." He gestured through the window. "Why, I do believe the sun is breaking through. That should cheer things up a bit."

It was true. The sky was rapidly clearing. Ahead of the ship was a hard, clear blue sky, a blazing sun.

"Warming up nicely," the captain said.

"Tell me," Luman said casually. "What's the name of this ship?"

"This ship? What a question, Mr. Luman. What a question."

"*Tell me*," Luman shouted. "Tell me the goddamn name."

"Why, Mr. Luman," the captain said. "This ship is called the *Melanie*."

It was like a physical blow to the stomach.

"That's my daughter's name. That was my daughter's name."

"Really?" said the captain. "What a coincidence."

"And where," Luman asked, "are we going? What is our destination?"

"Why, the Bahamas, Mr. Luman. We're going to the Bahamas."

"And where did we sail from?"

"So many questions, Mr. Bluman. We sailed from New York. Are you sure you're feeling all right? You look a little liverish to me. Still getting your sea legs, perhaps. In any case, I've enjoyed talking to you, but I really must be getting back to work. What's a bridge without a captain, after all?"

"I want to send a telegram," Luman said. "Home."

"That's the purser's department, you know. I'm sure he'll oblige you."

"He told me that the radio isn't working."

"True," the captain said. "We are

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having some temporary difficulties, but we hope to have everything shipshape soon. And now, if you'll excuse me, I really must get back to work."

It was getting hot on deck now. Luman took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. Sweat stained the armpits of his shirt and trickled down his back. He loosened his collar, removed his tie.

The Bahamas, he thought. Why would I take a trip to the Bahamas? This isn't even my vacation. I had two weeks in ... June. In ... where the hell did I go?

Prince Edward Island, he told himself. Lobsters. Beaches. All that stuff. I remember.

Melanie.

She would have been seven this year. She would have been seven if he hadn't turned his head. If he hadn't been arguing with Carole again.

Did I deliberately choose this boat, he wondered. To punish myself? Or did the name send me into shock when I saw it?

Briefly he thought of taking up Dr. Phipps on his invitation. But better not get involved in all that. Better to send a telegram to his employers and get off the ship at his destination and take the first plane home. And then, maybe, consider seeking out some help. Some more professional help than Dr. Phipps could provide.

The sun, like some great magnet, had tugged more of the passengers out on the deck. Even now it was hardly crowded, but there was at least the appearance of normality. And for the first time Luman began to feel relatively normal.

A tall dark-haired woman in a very abbreviated swimsuit was sunning herself in a lounger a few hundred feet away, her body glistening with tanning oils. He was at first attentive. And then, as he drew closer, appalled. Carole. Here of all places.

His pulse quickened. He increased his pace. He stood over the dark-haired woman.

"Carole," he said.

The woman looked up, tilted back her sunglasses. He realized immediately that she was not Carole. There was a resemblance, certainly. But not from so close up.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's all right," she said. "It happens all the time."

"People mistake you for Carole?" he asked, confused.

"People mistake other people for other people again. It happens all the time. My analyst explained it to me once. Transference, that's what it's called. Projecting your hopes and fears and love and hatred and all the rest of it onto a convenient target. Transference. It happens all the time. Especially here. On the ship. It concentrates the memory wonderfully."

She smiled. "For example," she said, "you remind me of my first husband. You have the same build, the

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same coloring." She paused. "Do you have a birthmark on your left thigh?"

"On my shoulder."

"Do you whistle 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' in the shower?"

"I'm Canadian," he said. "I whistle polkas."

"I like Canada," she said. "It's so clean."

"Yes," he agreed. "Very clean."

With the darkness came fog, thick fog, swirling against the porthole of his cabin.

Fog in the Bahamas? He wondered for a moment, but he did not really care to think about it. Telegram tomorrow, he told himself. Plane home. That was all he cared to think about.

He realized that he was hungry. He made his way to the dining room. At the entrance, he faltered. Which was his table? The purser materialized by his side and took his arm.

"Good evening, Mr. Newman," he said. "The captain has invited you to dine at his table tonight."

He steered Luman to the head table. Seated there were the elderly couple he had met on the deck, and the woman from the bar, Nancy. Also the doctor.

"Mr. Luman," Nancy said. "I told you I would see you at dinner. I believe you know the Taylors." She motioned to the elderly couple.

"*Omnia descendo vinces*, Bluman," said the old man. "Knowledge conquers all."

Luman looked at him blankly.

"Surely you remember your old school motto?"

"How could I forget it?" Luman said, sitting down.

What, he wondered, *was* my school motto? Not that, surely. Did it even have a motto?

"Feeling better, Mr. Newman?" asked the doctor.

"Much better, thank you."

"Foggy night," said the captain. "I suppose you people think I should be on the bridge. But no need to worry. Computers. Computers will take care of us."

"Does it often get this foggy," Luman asked, "on the route to the Bahamas?"

"The Bahamas?" said the captain. "Why yes, of course, the Bahamas. When you've traveled as long and as far as I have, it can all begin to blur. Yes, indeed, the Bahamas. What was the question?"

"Never mind," Luman said.

Luman was seated next to Nancy Singer. When he salted his food before tasting it she said, "You really shouldn't with your blood pressure. I told you that before. Besides, salting your food before tasting it shows personal rigidity. I told you that, too."

"Several people have told me that. You may have been one of them."

"Hot fudge sundaes," she said, as he bit into the roast beef. It was dry and chewy.

"I'm sorry?"

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"Your favorite dessert."

"That's right," he said. "And I bet yours is ... strawberry cheesecake."

"You *do* remember," she said.

"Lucky guess," he said. "I wonder what *is* for dessert?"

"Custard," said the old lady, Mrs. Taylor. "I do like a bit of custard. You can't go wrong with custard."

"Dessert is gateau, Mr. Newman," said the purser. "But perhaps we could arrange a hot-fudge sundae. We do try to please our passengers, you know. We try to make your voyage with us a pleasurable one. It's no less than you deserve."

"Your just desserts," said the captain, chuckling. "We make sure you get your just desserts."

The remark was greeted with great merriment. And then, abruptly, the laughter died away. Luman turned his head to see what his dining companions were looking at.

"You bastard," said the woman from the deck, the woman he had mistaken for Carole. She was talking to him. She was now fully clothed, also quite drunk. She grabbed his shoulder. "You always were a bastard, Rick."

The purser rose from the table. Gently he took the woman's arm.

"Mrs. Therone," he said, "I believe you're making a mistake. This person's name is not Rick. It's Dick. Dick Newman."

"Luman," Luman said, automatically.

"Reiman," she said. "Rick Reiman. I know who he is. I lived with him for eight years. Ask him what he whistles in the shower. Ask him what he does when he gets lost."

The resemblance to Carole, in her facial constrictions and tone of voice, was rather remarkable. But it was no more than that: a resemblance.

"Mrs. Therone, I believe your table is over here," the purser said, steering her away. "Or perhaps you would like to go to your cabin and lie down...."

"Poor woman," the captain said, as the purser led her away. "Nerves, I suppose. Lots of passengers get that way. Anticipation, you know. We should shut the bars early tonight." The doctor nodded in agreement.

"Anticipation?" Luman asked.

"Why," said the captain, "don't you know? We shall arrive early tomorrow."

Rather than relief, Luman felt an obscure alarm.

"Tomorrow," he said. "So soon?"

"Mr. Newman," said the captain. "This trip takes seven days. No more and no less. Surely you read that brochure?"

"And good things," said the old gentleman, Mr. Taylor, "must come to an end. You should have listened to me, Bluman. Taken some time to smell the flowers. It's as I always used to say, *For when the one great scorer comes to write against your name, He'll ask not if you won or lost, but if you played the game.*"

"Game," Luman said. "What game?"

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"Cricket, my boy. But as I always said, cricket is a good deal like life."

"No, it isn't," Luman said. "No, it isn't."

"What *do* you do when you're lost?" Nancy asked him. By unspoken agreement, they were walking towards her cabin.

"What?" he asked. He was lost in thought, guilty thoughts. About his wife. They hadn't tried hard enough, Hadn't tried everything to make it work. It was too easy to turn to strangers. Too easy to just drift apart, clinging stubbornly to their own positions, their own demands. Only the child had kept them together, distant planets circling the same sun. After Melanie had died, they had rapidly spun apart....

"I said, what *do* you do when you get lost?"

"I never met that woman," Luman said. "Only once, anyway. Up on deck."

"But what do you do?"

"I hate to ask directions."

"How very masculine," she said.

How? he wondered. How did she know that?

"Lucky guess," she said. "Don't worry about it."

There was a child's doll on the floor of the corridor outside her cabin.

"Oh, dear," she said. "The little girl will be so upset."

"Little girl?"

"Well, it's hardly likely to be a boy, is it?"

She picked up the doll, straightened out its dress, set it down on a ledge outside the door.

"I haven't seen any children on this ship," he said. "Although I thought I heard one."

"There aren't any," she said. "Unless they were visiting."

"Visiting?"

They were at the door of her cabin. She unlocked it, then turned and kissed him on the lips. She pushed the door open and pulled him inside.

"Visiting?" he asked, again.

"The Bahamas," she said. "Unless they're visiting the Bahamas."

She pulled him down with her onto the bed.

"Make it good," she said. "Make it the best. Make it like the last time you ever make love."

It was, he thought, a curiously baroque thing for her to say. Only in romance novels did people talk like that. And certainly not sensible career women like Nancy. But he had little time to pause and reflect on the matter.

He woke before dawn. The fog was thinner now, but still he could see only a few feet beyond the porthole. Then the sun came up, and the fog began to thin some more.

After a while he saw the beacon, a long way off. And very bright, he thought, very bright to shine through the fog.

He nudged Nancy. She woke, yawned, stretched her arms.

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"Look," he said. "Look at that."

She followed his gaze.

"That's no lighthouse," he said.

"It's the beacon," she said. She sighed. "You should have woken me. Now we won't have time...."

Luman got out of bed and crossed to the porthole.

"Where are we?" he asked. The shoreline ahead, now faintly visible, was rocky and bleak. The beacon was already almost too bright to stare at directly.

Not the Bahamas, he thought.

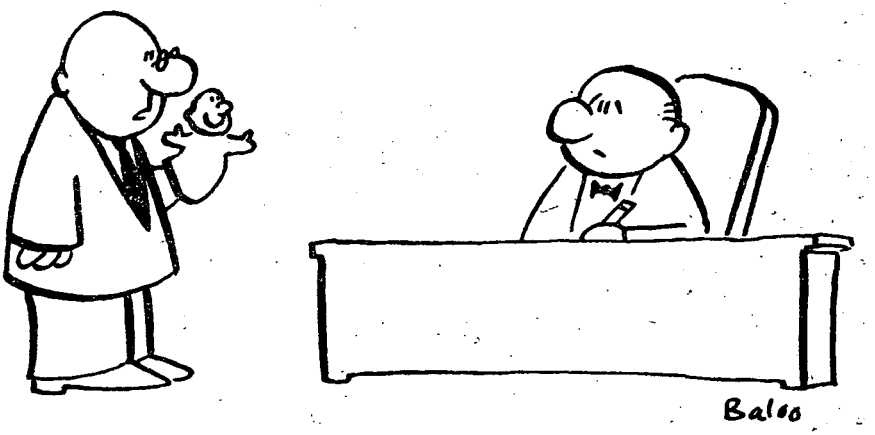
And somehow he was not surprised.

"Journey's end," she said. "And you know where we are."

As the boat negotiated its slow entry to the port, the waters became unnaturally still. Sea, shoreline, and fog mingled in a landscape of the void. The great beacon rose up out of the fog to greet them, flooding the cabin with a sickly orange light.

"I guess," Luman said. "I guess I know."

The ship sailed on, nearer and nearer to Hell.



"I'm sorry, Thompson, but we're replacing you with this hand puppet."

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Edward Hughes wrote "A Born Charmer," (August 1981) and "The Price of Livery," (March 1982). Here is a third story in the series about a post holocaust Wales and a remarkable young man named Dafydd.

The Master Stroke

BY

EDWARD F. HUGHES

Ring-a-bell, ding-a-bell,
Curig of History
Campanologically,
Robbed honest folk.
Rumors of hideouts,
Deepening the mystery,
Judasiscariotly,
Point to Cwm Goch.
— Anonymous Sassenach scholar

They sent Ceinwen Thomas up Moelfre to tell Dafydd Llewelyn about his father. The old man had collapsed while shearing a sheep. Dafydd came downhill faster even than a young man of twenty-two should risk. He found his *tad* on the floor of the shearing pen. Brother Owain, Tam Lewis the hired shearer, and Megan Lloyd the daily woman, were flapping about like demented poultry.

Dafydd rolled up his jacket, tucked it under his father's head. The *tad* was pale, clammy and unconscious.

Owain screeched, "Don't move him! We are waiting for the doctor."

Dafydd glared at his brother. "He is not going to lie here until that blotty slowcoach arrives. If we move him careful, we can get him onto the settee...."

After a couple of days, Arfon Llewelyn was able to talk and take nourishment, although he was still very weak. Catching Emrys Jones as he drove the bus past the Careg Ddu turning, Dafydd explained that, for the time being, he must be excused from sentinel duty.

"Don't worry, boyo," Emrys reassured him. "Willie Evans has been after your job ever since we licked Black Michael's Raiders. He and Matty Price can manage sentinel between them until your *tad* is fit again."

"He don't get my shotgun," Dafydd cautioned.

Emrys released his brake. "Man —

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I would not trust little Willie with a catapult. If he sees anything to report, he can run and tell us."

On the way back to Careg Ddu, Dafydd passed the entrance to the Thomas holding. Ceinwen was leaning on the gate.

"How is the *tad*, Dai?"

He told her. Also, that Owain's young lady, Anghared Preese the new schoolmistress, was coming twice a day to prepare meals for himself and Owain, and to cook something tasty for the *tad* because Meg Lloyd was not clever at invalid cooking. And that the *meddyg* said the *tad* might be able to get around on sticks in a week or so.

Ceinwen said firmly, "You should get him a wheelchair. One of them he can push himself around in."

Dafydd said, "Oh, great idea! And where, on the Lleyn, would we find a wheelchair?"

"There is a shop in Pwllheli has one," Ceinwen told him. "A fellow called Gonest Ivor Edwardes owns it. It is the shop with the window full of furniture. The wheelchair is stood by the door."

Dafydd recalled the Edwardes emporium. Since there were no more than a couple of dozen *siopai* in Pwllheli, it was no great feat. He said, "What does Gonest Ivor want for wheelchair?"

Ceinwen chewed a fingernail reflectively. "Five or six fleeces, I think his price was."

Dafydd reckoned up the fleeces in store at Careg Ddu. "That does not seem too dear for something as complicated as a wheelchair. I will ask Owain for them. He is in charge of everything since the *tad's* trouble."

Ceinwen's eyebrows went up. "Surely your Owain is not going to quibble about a few fleeces to ease your *tad's* convalescence?"

Dafydd studied his bootcaps. "Owain is becoming very tight these days. He is saving up to get married. You would think Careg Ddu already belonged to him."

Ceinwen frowned. "I will have a word with Anghared Preese. She has already started a clinic for the schoolchildren. I think she would approve of a wheelchair for your *tad*."

Owain spoke about it at breakfast the following day. He said, "Dai, I am thinking that our *tad* could use a wheelchair now that his strength is coming back. The *meddyg* says he will never be much good on his pins again." He paused, as though in thought. "I believe there is a shop in Pwllheli has one for sale. Do you think you might take half a dozen fleeces along there with you, and see if you can get it for him? I will try to manage without you for the day."

Dafydd harnessed the cob into the trap, picked six prime fleeces from store, and put the pony at the track down to the main road. Ceinwen waited for him at the Thomas gate. She climbed up beside him, slipping an arm through his. "My *mam* wants some shirt material, if we can find any. Did

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Owain tell you what Anghared said?"

Dafydd flicked the cob's rump. "Not a word."

Ceinwen grinned. "I didn't think he would."

The cracked bell of Pwllheli's main church sounded noon as they arrived in town. Dafydd parked at the market hitching rail, and crossed the road towards the furniture emporium. He left the bundle of fleeces under cover in the trap. No point in letting Edwardes know how much he was prepared to pay for the wheelchair.

Next to the furniture shop was a window stocked with female dummies clad in pre-bomb women's clothes. A model in a long white wedding dress stood in the center of the display. Dafydd grinned at the crazy hairdos and painted faces. By damn — if that was how they looked before the bombs, he might have enjoyed living then.

Ceinwen said, "Don't that old wedding dress look lovely, Dai?"

Her hand was hot on his arm. He pulled away. "Don't you be getting no fancy ideas, girl!"

Ceinwen sighed, following him into Gonest Ivor's *siop*.

Edwardes wore a long, gloomy face, decorated with a drooping moustache. He said, "That is the only working wheelchair this side of Snowdon, boyo. I am asking twenty-five fleeces for it, or the equivalent in spun wool. And believe you me, it is worth twice that."

Dafydd stared sadly at the chair. Where in Heaven's name had Ceinwen got her price from? Twenty-five fleeces! Owain would have a fit if he went back to Careg Ddu to ask for another nineteen. And spun wool was out of the question since Emrys Jones's dream of a wool factory had foundered on the rock of rusted-tight machinery.

He pleaded. "Could you come down a bit, Mister Edwardes? The chair was for my *tad*, so he could get around a bit."

Gonest Ivor glowered at him. "Come down how much?" He did a rapid sum on his fingers. "Twenty-three fleeces, then. That is my bottom price."

Dafydd pushed Ceinwen towards the door. "Good-bye, Mister Edwardes. My *tad* will have to make do with sticks for a while yet."

Edwardes scowled. "Don't be blaming me for your *tad's* troubles, young fellow. We are all entitled to make a living, you know."

They obtained Myfanwy Thomas's shirt lengths at a shop where Ceinwen's *mam* ran an account settled monthly in eggs and milk. In the trap, going home, Ceinwen said, "Pity you don't have an account with Gonest Ivor."

"I would sooner have an argument with that fellow," Dafydd said grimly. "He gives me a pain in the bum." He spat his contempt in the road. "Where did you get your price from?"

Ceinwen made a face. "Blodwen Hughes has got a job sewing at the dress *siop*. She saw a card on that chair

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saying six fleeces. I bet Edwardes put his price up when he heard about your *tad*."

"How would he know about the *tad*?"

"That *meddyg* talks to everybody." She frowned. "What will you do now?"

Dafydd's face grew stony. "What would you do in my place?"

Her eyes widened. "Dai — you wouldn't dare!"

"Why not? Who would know? Owain never goes to Pwllheli, now that the *tad* cannot work. Obviously the *tad* cannot go there. Anyway — who says that Edwardes has the only chair on the Lleyn? I hear there's a fellow in Criccieth with one."

Her eyes gleamed with recklessness. "Could you do it? It would serve Edwardes right."

He flapped the reins on the flagging pony's rump, thinking. If he was ever to put his dangerous knack to a praiseworthy use, surely providing the *tad* with a wheelchair would be regarded as commendable. He said, "I had a damn good look at Gonest Ivor's. Don't see why I can't charm one as good. Like to see me try?"

She squeezed his hand. "Your *tad* would love one, Dai."

He said, "Look behind, then."

There was a wheelchair in the back of the trap....

Arfon Llewelyn was delighted with his new means of transport. He barged about the house like a child on a new pair of roller skates. Dafydd decided that a ramp at the front steps would help the old man get out of doors when the weather grew warmer.

Owain caught him in the barn, sawing wedges. His face was grim. He said, "A moment with you, young Dai. Where did you get them other fleeces for that wheelchair?"

Taken by surprise, Dafydd stammered, "What — what other fleeces?"

Owain's eyes were like twin rifle barrels. "Anghared was in Pwllheli last week. She noticed that chair. Ivor Edwardes wanted thirty-five fleeces for it."

"*Twentyfive*, it was—!" Dafydd paused. He had fallen into a trap.

Owain's eyes gleamed. "So — you didn't have enough fleeces! Where did you get the rest?"

Dafydd's brain went like a pet mouse on a treadmill. "I didn't! I—" Owain must never learn how the wheelchair came to Careg Ddu. Two people, only, in Cwm Goch knew that Dafydd Llewelyn could charm, and that was two too many.

Owain leered confidently. "Well? How did you come by that chair? Are you trying to tell me that mean old sod Edwardes let you have it for *six* fleeces?"

"No! No — he didn't do that."

"I am sure he did not. So you stole it from him?"

"*Duw!* I didn't steal it."

Owain gloated in triumph. "Well, you got it from him some way. Did you borrow the other fleeces?"

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Dafydd closed his lips: He would answer no more questions. And he would warn Ceinwen to watch her tongue. Brother Owain could add two and two like anyone else, if he was forced to.

Owain wagged his head in solemn disapproval. "So, little brother — you didn't steal it. And I don't believe anyone lent you nineteen fleeces — so you didn't pay Edwardes's price. And he didn't sell it to you for six fleeces. Did he give it to you?"

Dafydd stared sulkily at his brother. "I am not saying nothing more. The *tad* has his chair, and he is happy with it. Why should you worry about how he got it?"

Owain flourished a fist. "Because I don't want no Pwllheli Rangers coming up here after my thieving brother. So I am taking that chair back to Ivor Edwardes tomorrow, before he makes trouble about it."

Dafydd flushed. "You can't do that! What will our *tad* say? He is just getting to like it."

"What will our *tad* say if I tell him his younger son is a thief?"

Dafydd stood, wordless.

Ceinwen said, "You'll have to stop him. If he turns up at Edwardes's shop with a *second* wheelchair, you'll be in trouble."

"How can I stop him? He is stubborn, like all the Llewelyns. He will go, whatever I do. Could you get your *tad* to say he lent me the fleeces?"

She grimaced. "My *tad* hasn't got any fleeces. Since that business at Trefan he has put all his savings into gin. He reckons it is easier to store, doesn't rot, and the rats can't get at it."

"Well, gin, then. I could have easy talked Edwardes into selling that chair for gin."

She put a hand over his mouth. "Dai — you will only complicate things if you ask my *tad* to lie for you. What if *he* discovered you charmed that chair?"

Dafydd shivered. Tecwin Thomas's extreme views on charmers was well known. He scuffed the ground with his toe. "Well then, I had better be in Pwllheli tomorrow morning to make sure my brother does not complicate things too much for me."

She said, "I think I will come with you."

They hid their bikes behind the stalls on the far side of the market. The war between the bandit Caradoc Curig and Lord Tudur, King Rhys's father, had created some fine open spaces in Pwllheli town center. The open market and the nearby cockfighting pit stood on ground cleared of battle's debris.

Dafydd recalled the rhyme in Sassenach which linked his own village to the long-dead scoundrel who had stolen the church bell. Legend claimed that Caradoc had taken the bell to melt down into bullets. More likely he had stolen it to prevent the townsfolk sounding a Raiders warning. The present cracked substitute, it was said, came from a chapel down the street.

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Pity you couldn't get away with Caradoc's methods these days.

The cracked bell began to strike the hour. Ceinwen said, "I think he is coming."

Dafydd concentrated his gaze on the wheelchair standing in Ivor Edwardes's doorway. His timing, now, was all important. The chair must not be in the doorway when Owain arrived with the charmed substitute. Nor must it disappear while anyone was looking at it. That would be the signal for an immediate charmer alarm. He must catch his chance.

Ceinwen hissed, "He has turned into Kingsbend. Hurry, Dai!"

Dafydd saw his chance, hurried ... and Gonest Ivor's chair was gone.

They watched Owain pull up outside the shop, climb down, and go in. They saw Gonest Ivor emerge from the interior to stare in bewilderment at the spot normally occupied by his wheelchair. They observed Owain lift the charmed substitute from the rear of the trap, and deposit it in the shop doorway. They noticed, also, that Owain dragged a lumpy sack from the trap, and propped it beside the wheelchair. Ivor and Owain shook hands. Then Owain climbed back onto the trap, and Ivor carried the lumpy sack into the *siop*.

"By damn!" Dafydd breathed. "Owain has bribed the bugger!"

Ceinwen sniffed in disgust. "What did you expect from your brother? That was to keep Edwardes's mouth shut. Come on! We'd better be going, or Owain will be home long before us."

"No hurry," Dafydd said grimly. "He's got no pin in that outside hub. The wheel will be off in ten minutes. That will give us plenty of time to go round by Abererch, join the main road at Clogwyn, and get back before him."

She pecked his cheek. "Who's a clever boy, then?"

He ducked away. "Cut it out, Ceiny. People are watching. I am wondering if we have time to do a deal with Gonest Ivor."

She stared at him. "You mad? What sort of deal?"

He explained.

Ivor Edwardes looked cheerful when they entered the *siop*. No wonder, Dafydd reflected — a bag of good Careg Ddu spuds for nothing. He said, "*Bore da*, Mister Edwardes. I've come about that wheelchair."

Gonest Ivor's jaw dropped. "You again?"

"Listen!" Dafydd commanded. "You pulled a fast one on that fool brother of mine just now. You know he didn't steal that wheelchair — it's stood in your doorway all the time. He maybe picked it up for a moment and put it in the back of the trap to see if he could carry it okay. But he brought it back. And you had the nerve to take a bag of spuds off him."

Gonest Ivor's face paled. "He told me *you* stole it, and he was returning it."

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Dafydd raised a warning finger. "You know damn well that no one stole it. It has never been away from your shop. So why did you take them spuds off him?"

Gonest Ivor's mouth worked spasmodically, but no sound came. Dafydd continued remorselessly. "You wait here, Ceinwen, and keep an eye on this fellow. I will go and fetch a Ranger to sort things out properly with Mister Gonest Edwardes."

Gonest Ivor found speech. "Just a minute — what do you want?"

Dafydd hovered reluctantly in the doorway. "I was thinking we might still do a deal on that wheelchair."

Gonest Ivor relaxed. "Ah — so you got the fleeces, then?"

Dafydd ignored the question. "You church or chapel, Mister Edwardes?"

Gonest Ivor's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "What is that to you, boyo?"

Dafydd turned toward the door. "I won't be a minute, Ceiny."

Gonest Ivor's fingers clawed the air. "Wait! I am church, if you must know."

Dafydd grinned. "There's handy, now. You will be going to St. Peter's, no doubt. How would you like to get their bell back?"

Gonest Ivor frowned. "What bell?"

"The bell what Caradoc Curig stole to make bullets of."

Gonest Ivor squinted at him suspiciously. "What do you know about that bell?"

Dafydd smiled disarmingly. "I live near Cwm Goch, don't I? You know what the old rhyme says. Caradoc Curig had a hideout near my village. What would you say if I told you he never melted that bell down for bullets, and that I know where it is hidden?"

Gonest Ivor's lip curled. "What is the bell to me? I suppose you was thinking of offering it to me for the wheelchair?"

"That was the idea," Dafydd admitted. "Mister Edwardes, you are not very popular round here. You have somehow got a reputation for meanness. Wouldn't it be nice to be liked and admired for a change. Think — if you was to donate that original bell back to St. Peter's, how grateful they would be to you. You would become famous as their benefactor. Why, they might have services for you. Or name a chapel after you. And it would cost you only a wheelchair. I would even let you keep them spuds."

Ivor Edwardes lowered his eyes. Dafydd could tell he was tempted. *Duw!* Fancy guessing the right button to press on the old skinflint! He said, persuasively, "I wouldn't tell anyone how you got the bell back. You could tell 'em what you liked. So long as I get that wheelchair, I'll be satisfied."

Ivor Edwardes raised his eyes. There was a strange look in them, like a dog that gets a caress instead of a kick.

"Would the young lady hold her tongue, too?"

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"I will guarantee that."

Ivor Edwardes tried an unpracticed smile. "Okay, young man. You fetch that missing bell to my back door after dark, and you can have the wheelchair."

As they rode along the Abererch road, Ceinwen said accusingly, "You don't know where that bell is! You are going to charm him one."

Dafydd pedaled without hands to demonstrate his versatility. He said, "First, I am going to get out the *mam's* encyclopedia, and study up about bells. Then I will go back to Pwllheli with my binoculars to see how big it should be. Then I will find somewhere at Careg Ddu to discover the blessed thing."

She giggled. "How will you know what kind to charm?"

He put his hands back on the steering to negotiate a pothole. "I am willing to bet there is not a soul in Pwllheli what could tell you the right bell from the wrong one. So long as they get something that fits their belfry and sounds good, they'll be happy. I might even put 'Long live Gonest Ivor' round the rim."

Ceinwen's front wheel wobbled dangerously. "Something in Latin might be better."

He smirked. "I will look it up."

"What if Mister Edwardes had said he was chapel instead of church?"

"I would have offered him his old cracked bell back — after I had got it replaced with a new one."

Owain arrived home after dark. He let Dafydd rub the cob down, and put the trap away. Dafydd said to his brother, "What kept you?"

Owain was in a bad mood. "Blessed wheel came off just outside Pwllheli. Couldn't find the pin. Had to walk back to town for the wheelwright. Nearly broke my neck when the trap went over."

Dafydd whistled unsympathetically. "Teach you not to call me a thief. What did Gonest Ivor say?"

Owain stripped off his shirt to examine a scraped shoulder. "Edwardes seemed surprised. I don't think he knew the chair had gone until I told him. I gave him two stone of potatoes to keep his mouth shut."

Dafydd brought a bowl of warm water and a clean cloth. "Waste of good spuds. You'd have done better feeding them to the pigs." He dabbed dirt from his brother's skin.

"I stopped Edwardes going to the Rangers about that chair, anyway."

Dafydd grinned sourly. "I bet you have. If Edwardes hadn't noticed that chair was missing till you told him, I reckon he had forgotten all about it." It wasn't true, but as long as Owain thought he had achieved something, Dafydd was not going to harp on about it.

"Don't you say nothing to our old man," Owain warned.

"Not a blotty syllable," Dafydd agreed. "Anyway, I've got a new scheme to get the *tad* that wheelchair."

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Owain held head wearily. "I don't want to know about your blessed schemes."

"You will," Dafydd assured him. "I'll want to borrow *Gobaith* this weekend, and some rope and the low ladder." The presence of *Gobaith* would ensure his brother's attendance, since Owain never permitted anyone but himself to handle the great Careg Ddu mare. And Owain's presence would be sufficient to guarantee the bona fides of everything that occurred that weekend. Dafydd added, "I promised Ivor Edwardes I would find him a bell to replace that cracked one in Pwllheli church if he'd let me have the wheelchair."

His brother squirmed gingerly into his shirt. "Are you telling me you've found that old bell? I thought it went for bullets?"

"Think as you please," Dafydd responded cheerfully. "I'll still need *Gobaith* and the cart this weekend. I promised Edwardes I'd bring the bell down to Pwllheli without nobody seeing it."

The plan was audacious. When he had calculated the bell's size, he would bury a substitute in the bank of the culvert on the track down to the road. Then mare and rope would drag it from concealment under Owain's incorruptible gaze. Then it would be straight on to the low ladder and away to Edwardes's back door. Dafydd patted a rumbling stomach. "What time does your Anghared arrive?"

Next morning, pigs and poultry fed and Owain gone to the lower fields. Dafydd got out his binoculars. Reckoning St. Peter's steeple at one hundred fifty feet, and the road below to be ninety feet wide, simple Pythagoras gave him one seventy-five feet as the length of the hypotenuse. He chose a tall fence post and paced out a hundred and seventy-five feet from it. Then he checked the post's apparent size in the glasses. Unless St. Peter's belfry harbored a monster, he could now estimate the size of the bell he wanted.

He was back from Pwllheli within the hour, satisfied that the missing bell would be no more than four feet high. He tied pick and spade to the carrier of his bike and rode for the culvert.

The site he had chosen was the only unplowed ground near the track where one might reasonably expect to find a buried bell. And it was close to the main road as Llewelyn land went.

He propped the bike against a tree, unleashed his tools, and began to dig. The ground was hard, choked with flints. After several minutes, carefully stacking the excavated earth at the top of the bank, his pick struck an obstacle which refused to be levered out. His skin prickled. Surely not: it would be too much of a coincidence to find the missing bell buried where he had chosen to hide his substitute. He got the spade, and began to dig around it. His heart ceased pounding, when, by the long, lumpy shape it became obvious that he had found no buried bell.

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Under the soil lay plastic sheeting. He pulled a loose edge aside, exposing a well-greased automatic rifle of pre-bomb manufacture. Below it lay another ... and another....

He hunkered back, astonished. So, bell or no bell, the old ryhme was true! Caradoc Curig *did* have a hideout near Cwm Goch. But why bury weapons? Dafydd threw his mind back to history lessons under old Jenkyns, the Cwm Goch schoolmaster of his youth. He recalled the dry voice lecturing a bored class on the post-bomb period. Hadn't King Rhys's father driven the Raiders out of South Lleyn, and banned the carrying of weapons by all except his soldiers and licensed militia?

Dafydd sat among his excavations, visualizing a desperate, beaten Curig urging his tired men to hide their weapons before melting into the countryside. Perhaps, somewhere along the bank, the bell, too, was hidden. The last thing a decamping Raider would need was bullets.

Dafydd picked up his spade and began to refill the hole. Dig out those still-deadly weapons, and he might very well create further gangs of Raiders. Far better that no one should know of the buried armament. And the bell, if it *was* there, would have to stay hidden with the weapons.

Meticulously he replaced the turf he had cut from the top soil, stamping it down until his disturbance was scarcely noticeable. Then he shouldered his tools and crossed the culvert to commence operations on the far bank.

Ceinwen came up with the bread next morning as Dafydd was entering the poultry house. She said, "When is the great day?"

He paused, hand on latch. "I am going down for *Gobaith* as soon as I've collected the eggs. Owain is letting me use her to get the bell out."

She piled the loaves on a shelf in the cold room. "Have you done it, then?"

He nodded. "Bronze, they are made of. Three parts copper to one part tin for church bells. I've buried it by the culvert. *Gobaith* will pull it out while Owain watches. Then he can't accuse me of stealing."

She said eagerly. "Can I come with you — for *Gobaith*, I mean?"

"If you like." It was years since Ceinwen had rode, shrieking with delight, on *Gobaith's* back.

"I'll go and get my trousers on."

He grinned. "I shouldn't worry. I seen better legs on milking stools."

She stuck out her tongue. "I'll help Meg with the pots until you are ready."

Dafydd kicked his heels into the plow horse's flanks. "Come on, girl!"

A bell mouth protruded from the soil on the far bank of the stream. A line from the mare's traces looped over the water to a noose around the bell. Slowly *Gobaith* took the strain. The line tightened, stretched. The bell stayed fast in the ground.

Owain gripped the bridle, stroked

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the mare's muzzle, and murmured, "Let us go for a walk, little one."

Gobaith dug in her great hooves, put her weight against the chest bank. The bell broke from the bank and rolled, clapper clanging, down the slope into the stream.

Dafydd leaned forward, patting the massive neck.

Owain strode to the top of the bank. "By damn, Dai — that's a fine instrument. I would think it is worth more than anything that old Edwardes has in his *siop*."

Dafydd slid from the mare's back. "If it gets the *tad* his wheelchair, I'll be satisfied." He scrambled down to the water, and stood astride the bell, sluicing away muddy soil with cupped palms.

Owain said suspiciously, "How did you know it was buried in the bank?"

Dafydd had rehearsed the explanation. "I was digging for a badger, wasn't I? Found a hole what ended in metal, and discovered the bell."

"Why didn't you tell us about it before?"

Dafydd hesitated, mouth open.

Ceinwen said hurriedly, "What are the words round the rim?"

Gratefully, Dafydd rolled the bell round, scrutinizing the legend he had incised. Pretending to read, he said hesitantly, "*Vivit post funera virtus.*"

Owain, who had done two years Latin under old Jenkyns, said, "Virtue survives the grave."

Ceinwen clapped her hands. "There's fitting for you! After us digging it up and all, I mean."

Dafydd grinned in admiration. When it came to deceit, you couldn't beat a woman. He was pleased with the Latin himself: it had taken hours to find it in the *mam's* dictionary.

"Well," Owain announced. "Hadn't you better get it on the cart and covered up before someone comes along? You promised Edwardes you'd keep it a secret."

Several days later Arfon Llewelyn rolled his wheelchair down Dafydd's wedges into the yard. The sun was shining. Owain was sowing beet somewhere. Dafydd was packing sandwiches into a satchel.

"*Mab!*"

Dafydd came running.

His father looked up, squinting in the bright light. "Would you take us for a trip down towards the road?"

Towards the road? And the culvert? And the site of the bell's burial place? The *tad's* expression was bland, but Dafydd felt his hair rise. He said, "I was going up Moelfre to check on the sheep."

The *tad* lowered bushy eyebrows. "Cannot the sheep wait a few more minutes, *mab?* I was fancying a breath of air, and a look at something that is not wallpapered. I would not ask you, but I don't think I can get back up the hill on my own."

Dafydd put down the satchel. Unfair to be suspicious of the old man. "You win, *tad*. Let them blessed sheep

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look after themselves a bit longer." He got a blanket from the house, and tucked it round his father's legs. "Got to keep you warm, you know."

After a few minutes, he began to enjoy their peaceful progress down the track. When they reached the site of his excavations by the stream, Arfon Llewelyn said, "Is that where you found the bell?"

Dafydd nodded, feeling again a twinge of uneasiness. The *tad* was no fool. Why had he chosen to come this way?

"I remember," Arfon Llewelyn said reminiscently, "thirty-odd years ago, when I was about your age, *mab*, watching some Raiders here. There was no culvert then, only stepping-stones. Your *tadcu* built the culvert later. I was hiding in the field above, where the Raiders couldn't see me.

"They had been fighting Lord Tudur's soldiers in Pwllheli for three days — you could see the smoke drifting in the sky for miles. I think they were on the run; some of them were wounded. They had this cart with them, full of loot. I watched them burying their weapons beside the stream. Then they divided up the loot off the cart until the only thing left was a big bell. They smashed that up, and buried the pieces. You listening, *mab?*"

Dafydd's pulse was pounding. He felt trapped, helpless. He said hoarsely, "I am listening, *tad.*"

"Then they turned the cart horse loose and smashed up the cart. I caught the horse the next day. I christened him *Fydd.* That's where we got *Gobaith* from. *Fydd* sired her on the plow mare we had called *Cariad.* So then we had *Fydd, Gobaith,* and *Cariad.*

"I don't remember *Fydd* or *Cariad,*" said Dafydd desperately.

"And I don't remember no bell being buried," countered his father grimly. "Only bits and pieces of one."

Dafydd stared down at the gray head turned obstinately away from him. He made up his mind. Lie to Ivor Edwardes. Lie to brother Owain. Lie to the whole world, if necessary to protect his secret. But lie to the *tad* — no! He said, "I found the guns. I didn't look no further."

"And why did you not dig up the guns, *mab?*"

He hesitated. That was a question he had not expected. He said, "You taught me about guns. How to handle them. When to use them. Some folks never learn. I thought it was best to leave them where they were."

The gray head nodded approvingly. "And you didn't find no bits and pieces of a bell?"

"No, *tad.*" *Duw!* What if he asked straight out?

Arfon Llewelyn leaned back in the warm sunshine. His gray locks straggled down over the scarf round his neck. He said musingly, "I suppose they could have buried another bell what I didn't see." He looked up. "Would you agree to that, *mab?*"

Dafydd's hands were trembling on

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the wheelchair's grips. "If — if you want me to."

Arfon Llewelyn turned his eyes back to the distance. "I want you to, *mab*. You see, there is always a satisfactory explanation for things what puzzle you, if you only seek hard enough." He swung his head round again to stare at Dafydd. "And I have been seeking explanations for you ever since you come home one day with a toy soldier like Gethyn Thomas had."

Something like the shock you could get from an old battery went through Dafydd. He had forgotten the incident. Gethyn Thomas had not missed that soldier, because Dafydd had charmed it on the way home — inadvertantly, unplanned; out of a childish desire to own a toy like Gethyn Thomas had. And the *tad* was telling him that he knew!

Dafydd felt a burden drop from him: a burden he had carried for so long, he had forgotten the weight of it. *The tad had known all the time.* And, if the *tad* had known about him, so had his *mam*. And that miserable wretch Dafydd Madoc Llewelyn had never actually deceived his parents about his knack.

He expelled a deep breath. Quite suddenly he wanted to hug this fierce old man who understood so much. He put down his head and rubbed his cheek against his father's stubbly one. "Thanks *tad*," he whispered.

The old man coughed, and wriggled uncomfortably. "*Mab*," he said at length. "Don't ever make it necessary for anyone to seek explanations what even I couldn't swallow."

Dafydd's eyes were stinging. "I won't, *tad*," he promised. "I won't."

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A new short from Tom Disch, whose story "The Brave Little Toaster," (F&SF, August 1980) is planned as a full-length animated feature film from Walt Disney. Mr. Disch has also finished a new novel titled The Businessman, A Tale of Terror.

The Forbidden Thought

A RECRUITMENT TAPE

BY
THOMAS M. DISCH

(Date here)

Dear (Name here),

Like many of our most successful operatives at ATSBN — and possibly like you, (Name here) — I had the idea, back in my college days, that I wanted to be a Writer. With hindsight I can see that was a pretty dumb idea, but dumb ideas have often been powerful forces on the stage of history. If they weren't, our Agency would soon be out of business.

My ambition never amounted to much in practical terms. I produced a few reels of poetry that my communications advisor said were "promising" — reels about feeling lonely, depressed, and purposeless, the sort of feelings that trouble most of us before we're slotted into our careers. Nothing dangerous or subversive in those poems, and nothing very memorable either. God knows what they might have been a promise *of*, unless it was my future career with ATSBN, since somehow or other the Agency got a printout of them. Probably during a routine cross-audit between the Census Bureau and IRS. That was in (year), long after I'd left college. The poems had been buried down at the bottom of some bypassed chip together with chess games from childhood, multiple choice quizzes, and all the other trivial data that somehow escapes complete erasure. I don't know what there was in them to interest the Agency, but of course "Why Me?" is never a relevant question in security matters, is it? The Agency wanted to talk to me, so I went to the Agency. You can imagine my surprise when it turned out they were offering me a job!

At that time I was working with a (City here)-based multinational spe-

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cializing in (Type of software here) programs, a position very much like that which you, (Name here), occupy at (Company's name). Like you, I had (number of dependants) to support and a wallet full of credit cards that always semed to spend faster than I earned. A job is a job is a job, as some poet or other once wrote, and since the job that ATSBN was offering didn't conflict with my work for my employer-of-record, I signed on the dotted line.

Then as now, the Government answered all questions as to the existence of ATSBN with an official "No Comment." However it seemed pretty obvious that someone somewhere was doing *something*, since the conflicts and general disorganization of the '80's were giving way to the stability of the present era. The media, as usual, had their theories, mostly harebrained, about how this had been accomplished. Let me deny at once and categorically the suggestion, so common and so unfounded, that ATSBN's agents are nothing but assassins with computer access. The Agency is proud of its humanitarian record. Fighting fire with fire has always been our policy. Or, to put it a better way: $(\sqrt{x})^2 = x$.

"How does all this affect *me?*" you must be wondering at this point, (Name here).

It is my personal pleasure to inform you that the (city or region) branch of ATSBN has selected you as a candidate for training as a field operative. Would you therefore please come to our regional office at (address), where you will be able to view a printout of the concluding portion of this tape on an ATSBN descrambler. This security precaution is necessary because of the highly sensitive nature of the data to be imparted — nothing less than a statement of the mandated purpose of our Agency and the means employed to accomplish that purpose.

You are under no obligation to respond to this invitation, (Name here), but if you do, let me take this opportunity to wish you a successful screening interview and a rewarding career with The Agency That Shall Be Nameless.

So you've decided to continue viewing this letter of invitation. Let me be the first to welcome you to ATSBN.

Your invitation to this office presumes that in some respects the privileged information you are about to receive will not come entirely as a surprise. Most individuals who've reached (Educational level here) have figured out by themselves the nature of ATSBN's primary mandated goal — which is the supression of what certain disaffected groups refer to as the Forbidden Thought.

To speak of a single "forbidden thought" is, needless to say, a drastic oversimplification. The mathematical encoding of the deep structures of human consciousness is altogether beyond the unaided grasp of that con-

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sciousness. Even ATSBN's chief programmers are limited to a seventh degree of cybernetic indirection. We are not being evasive when we insist there is no simple verbal formula that would correspond with the so-called Forbidden Thought. Even such a potentially subversive formulation as "The President is criminally stupid" may be, in some minds, only a harmless exaggeration, while a scan of the consciousness of an actual assassin might yield nothing more sinister, for days on end, than a popular tune repeated like a tape-loop. Only when patterns of criminal potential can be detected in the deepest structures of consciousness — where, to use an old-fashioned term, Faith is involved — only then is remedial patterning indicated.

Your work as a field operative will be to seek out in your daily working and leisure environments individuals at whose deepest levels of consciousness such a Faith may have taken root and then to neutralize its potentially harmful effects. Naturally, the Agency cannot employ operatives who may themselves harbor such subversive potential, and therefore as you read this letter in our studicle, your thought patterns are being monitored by our most sensitive scanners.

IMPORTANT IMPORTANT IMPORTANT

Please read the following instructions carefully.

While it is not possible to set forth the Forbidden Thought in so many words, ATSBN has developed a simple verbal formula that is highly effective in eliciting a response at the deepest levels of consciousness. Please give your undivided attention to the three boxed statements that follow. Think about them. Ask yourself if they are true. Explore the feelings they call forth. Our instruments, meanwhile, will take their scan.

1. The Government (Company, School) is my enemy.
2. The Government (Company, School) wants to control all my actions.
3. I must resist the Government (Company, School).

If, at the deepest levels of consciousness, you have added to these propositions the important qualification, *"I* am the Government (Company, School)," then you are among the 97.7 percent whose thought processes do not require remedial patterning. If, on the other hand, your response was an unqualified acceptance of those propositions, that remedial patterning has now been accomplished.

In either case, welcome to ATSBN, (Name here)!

Sincerely,

(Signature)
(Name of Regional Director)
Office of Personnel & Recruitment
ATSBN

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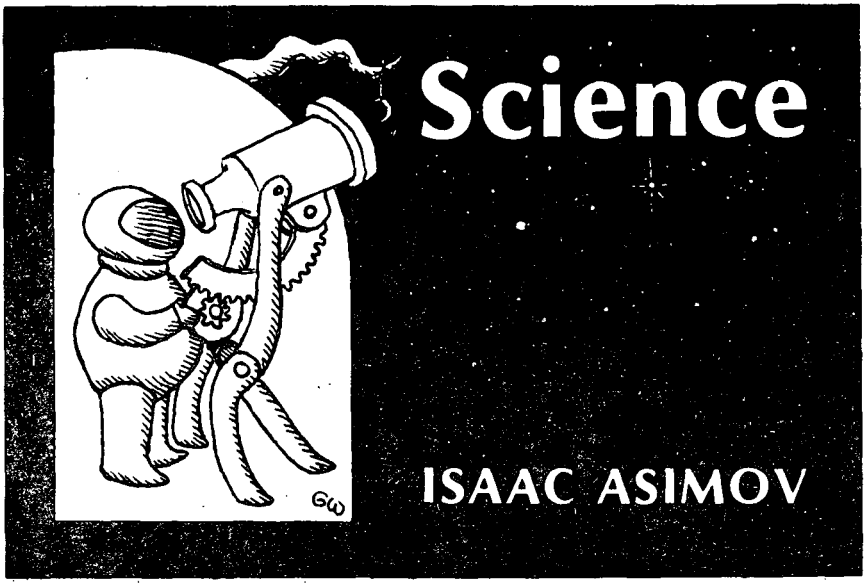

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

OUT IN THE BOONDOCKS

In 1584, the French satirist Francois Rabelais wrote, "Everything comes to him who knows how to wait." This has been repeated in one form or another ever since, so that Disraeli and Longfellow are among those who are independently quoted to that effect. The aphorism is best known today in the slightly shorter form, "Everything comes to him who waits."

I have never been overly impressed by this comment, however. I felt that for many things one might have to wait far longer than one was likely to live. After all, please note that all the aphorism-makers carefully refrain from putting an upper limit on the period of waiting.

In my own case, it seemed to me (quite early in the game) that I would never have a book on the best-seller lists, no matter how skillfully I might wait.

Mind you, this is not to say that my books don't sell well. Some do. In fact some sell very well — but only over the course of years and decades. They never sell *intensively*. They never sell so much in any one particular week as to earn a place on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

I grew reconciled to that. I even labored to convince myself that this was the result of my integrity and virtue.

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After all, my books never concern themselves with sex in clinical detail, or with violence in unpleasant concentration, or, indeed, with any form of sensationalism. On the positive side, they tend to be cerebral, with great emphasis on the rational discussion of motives and of alternate courses of action. Obviously, this, if well done, would have great appeal to a relatively small number of readers.

These few, I was well aware, would be several cuts above the average in intelligence and would be intensely loyal. These were *my* readers, and I loved them, and I would not change them for a trillion of the more ordinary kind.

And yet sometimes, in the middle of the night, when I was alone in the deepest recesses of my mind, I would wonder what might happen if, just for a little while, *everyone* was above average in intelligence, so that one of my books, would — just once — for just one week, be on the best-seller list.

Then I would dismiss the thought as pure fantasy.

In this way it came about that by October 1982, I had been a professional writer for 44 years, and had published 261 books, without one best-seller on the list. I had long decided that there was a kind of distinction about this that I ought to feel proud of. How many other writers, after all, could write 261 books with such unerring failure to hit the target?

And then it came to pass that on October 8, 1982, Doubleday published my 262nd book, which was *Foundation's Edge*, the fourth volume of my Foundation series. This came 32 years after I had written what I had decided would be the last word in the series. During all that time, I had continued to turn a resolutely deaf ear to the pleadings of my readers and editors for more. (Well, *they* kept waiting, and it came — as good old Francois had told them it would.).

As my editor, Hugh O'Neill, had staunchly predicted from the start, the book immediately hit the best-seller lists. On October 17, there appeared the *Sunday New York Times* on my doorstep, and there, on the list in the book-review section, in bold letters, was *Foundation's Edge* by Isaac Asimov.

After 44 years, my 262nd book hit the target, even though it was just as non-sexual, non-violent, non-sensational, and as thoroughly cerebral as all the rest — if not more so. It had only been necessary to wait.

Doubleday hosted a lavish party in my honor and, for a dazzled while, I felt the center of the Universe — which brings me back to the matter under discussion last month.

In last month's essay, I dealt with the natural yearning of people to be

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the center of the Universe. At first each person seemed to himself to be the center, and then that post was abandoned (reluctantly) to some site of cultural importance, then to the Earth as a whole, and then to the Solar system as a whole.

Even as late as the 1910's, it seemed reasonable to suppose that the Solar system was at or near the center of the Galaxy (and the Galaxy was then suspected of being just about the entire Universe).

After all, the various objects in the sky seemed to be placed symmetrically about us. Thus, the stars are not more thickly spread in one half of the sky than in the other; and the Milky Way, which represents the Galaxy as viewed through its long diameter, divides the sky into two more or less equal halves.

Before there is good reason to suspect that we are not more or less central in our position, some indisputable asymmetry must be discovered in the sky.

And one exists. The story of that asymmetry begins with a French astronomer, Charles Messier (1730-1817), who specialized in comets. He was one of those who early spotted Comet Halley on its return in 1759, the return that had been predicted by Edmund Halley (1656-1742) himself (see CHANGE OF TIME AND STATE, F & SF, April 1982).

After that, Messier took off. In the next fifteen years he made almost all the comet discoveries that took place, 21 of them by his own count. It was the passion of his life, and when he had to attend his wife on her deathbed, and thus missed discovering a comet, which was announced by a competing French astronomer instead, Messier is believably reported to have wept over the lost comet and all but ignored his lost wife.

What particularly bothered Messier was that every once in a while in his search for some tiny fuzzy object in the sky that would indicate the presence of a distant comet heading inward toward the neighborhood of the Sun, he would come across some tiny fuzzy object which, as it happened, was *always* present in the sky. He hated seeing one of the latter, growing excited, then being disappointed.

Between 1774 and 1784, he began to make, and publish, a list of 103 objects which, he felt, should be memorized by serious comet-hunters who would, in this way, never be misled into mistaking something worthless for something of cometary importance. The objects on his list are still known as "Messier 1," "Messier 2," and so on (or "M1," "M2," and so on.)

And yet, as it happened, his comet discoveries are trivial, while the objects he listed, in order that astronomers might learn to ignore them, proved

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of first-rate importance. The very first object on his list, for instance, happens to be the most important single object in the sky beyond the Solar system — it is the Crab Nebula.

Another object on Messier's list, M13, was first reported in 1714 by none other than Halley, the patron saint of all comet-hunters.

In 1781, the German-English astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822) received a copy of Messier's list. It was his ambition to examine every object in the sky, and so he made up his mind to look at each item on the list, including, of course, M13.

Herschel was the first to interpret correctly the nature of what we now call "globular clusters." Since M13 is in the constellation Hercules, it is sometimes called the "Great Hercules Cluster." Herschel discovered other globular clusters as well, and it turned out that about a quarter of all the objects on Messier's list were globular clusters.

These clusters are made up of hundreds of thousands of stars; the larger ones containing, possibly, millions of them. The star density within these clusters is enormous. At the center of a large cluster of this type there may be as many as 1,000 stars per cubic parsec, while in our own neighborhood there is something like 0.075 stars per cubic parsec.

If we were at the center of a large globular cluster (and could survive there) we would see a night sky filled with a total of about 80,000,000 visible stars, of which (if the luminosity distribution there were what it is here) over 250,000 would be first magnitude or better.

Yet the globular clusters are so far away that the conglomeration of all those stars forms units that are only in a few cases visible from Earth to the unaided eye, and then just barely.

What is most interesting about the hundred or so globular clusters that are now known, however, is that almost all of them are on one side of the sky, almost none of them on the other. Nearly one-third of them are to be found within that portion of the sky subtended by the single constellation Sagittarius. This asymmetry was first noticed by Herschel's son, John (1792-1871), a noted astronomer in his own right.

This is the most remarkable asymmetry we can observe in the sky, yet it is not in itself sufficient to shake the suggestion that the Solar system is at the center of the Galaxy. There's just a chance, after all, that it might all be coincidence, that the globular clusters might just happen to be all on one side of us.

A turning point came in 1904, when the American astronomer Hen-

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rietta Swan Leavitt (1868-1921) first established a relationship between the length of the period of a type of star called a "Cepheid variable" and its intrinsic brightness, or "luminosity" (see THE FLICKERING YARDSTICK, F & SF, March 1960).

This meant it was possible, in principle, to compare the luminosity of a Cepheid variable with its apparent brightness in the sky, and to judge its distance from that, a distance that might be too great to judge in any other way then known.

In 1913, the Danish astronomer Ejnar Hertzsprung (1873-1967) converted this potentiality into reality and was the first to estimate the actual distances of some Cepheid variables.

This brings us to the American astronomer Harlow Shapley (1885-1972), who had earned his education with great difficulty because of his poverty stricken childhood, and who became an astronomer by accident. He had entered the University of Missouri in order to become a journalist, but their School of Journalism was not scheduled to open for a year, so young Shapley took a course in astronomy just to fill in the time — and never came back to Journalism.

Shapley grew interested in Cepheid variables and, by 1913, had demonstrated that they were not binary stars that eclipsed each other. He suggested, instead, that they were pulsating stars. About 10 years later, the English astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882-1944) worked out the theory of Cepheid pulsations in great detail and settled the matter.

Once Shapley joined Mt. Wilson Observatory in 1914, he undertook to investigate variable stars in globular clusters. In doing so, he discovered that they contained stars of a kind called "RR Lyrae variables," because the best known example of that class was a star known as RR Lyrae.

The manner in which the light of an RR Lyrae variable increases and diminishes is just like that of a Cepheid variable, but the period of variation of the former is smaller. RR Lyrae variables usually have a period of less than one day, whereas Cepheid variables have a period of a week or so.

Shapley decided that the difference in period of variation was not significant and that RR Lyrae variables were simply short-period Cepheid variables. He felt, therefore, that the relationship between brightness and period worked out by Leavitt for the Cepheid variables would work for the RR Lyrae variables as well. (In this, as it turned out, he was right.)

He proceeded to record the brightness and period of RR Lyrae variables in every one of the 93 globular clusters then known, and that gave him, at once, the *relative* distance of these clusters. Since he knew the direction in

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which they were located, and had determined their relative distances, he could build a three dimensional model of their distribution.

By 1918, Shapley had demonstrated to his own satisfaction (and, soon, to that of astronomers, generally) that the globular clusters were distributed with spherical symmetry about a point in the plane of the Milky Way, but a point very far from the Solar system.

If the Solar system was at or near the center of the Galaxy, it meant that the globular clusters were centered about or beyond one end of the Galaxy. Their maldistribution in the skies of Earth would then be indicative of their actual asymmetric distribution with respect to the Galaxy.

This didn't seem to be sensible, however. Why should these vast clusters of stars find something so interesting at one end of the Galaxy, when all our experience with the way the Law of Universal Gravitation works should lead us to believe that the clusters would be symmetrically distributed about the *center* of the Galaxy?

Shapley made the dramatic decision that the globular clusters *were* distributed about the center of the Galaxy, and that what we thought of as one end of the Galaxy *was, in point of fact, the center of the Galaxy, and that we,* not the globular clusters, were at one end of it.

But it that were so, it became necessary to explain the symmetry of everything else in the sky. If we were far at one end of the Galaxy, and if the center lay in the direction of Sagittarius where the globular clusters were most concentrated, then why did we not see far greater numbers of stars in the Sagittarius direction than in the opposite Gemini direction? Why wasn't the Milky Way in Sagittarius far brighter than in Gemini?

Such questions had to be answered, all the more so as confirmatory evidence of Shapley's suggestion quickly arose.

In the 1920's, the "spiral nebulae," observed here and there in the sky, were found to be not masses of gas, as had been suspected, but vast assemblages of stars; they were galaxies in their own right.

The nearest spiral galaxy is in the constellation of Andromeda and a study of this Andromeda galaxy showed that it, too, possessed globular clusters, just like our own if we allowed for the much greater distance of those of the Andromeda galaxy.

The globular clusters of the Andromeda galaxy were distributed with spherical symmetry about that galaxy's center, just as Shapley said our own Galaxy's globular clusters ought to be. We could *see* that this was the way in which the Andromeda galaxy's globular clusters behaved, and there was no reason to believe that ours should behave any differently.

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It came to be accepted, therefore, and was eventually demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt, that our Milky Way Galaxy is a spiral galaxy much like the Andromeda galaxy, and that the Solar system is not in its center, but is far out in one of the spiral arms.

Humanity, the Earth, the Sun, the entire Solar system is not near the center of things with respect to our Galaxy. Not at all! We are not even in the Galactic suburbs, but out in the boondocks. That may be humiliating, but that's the way it is.

To be sure, we *are* in or near the Galactic plane. That is why the Milky Way cuts the sky into two equal halves.

But the symmetry! Why is the Milky Way more or less equally bright all around?

If we examine the Andromeda galaxy, and other spiral galaxies close enough to be seen in some detail, we find that the spiral arms are rich in dust clouds that do not enclose stars and that are therefore not illuminated. They are "dark nebulae."

If such dark nebulae existed in space far from any stars, they would not be seen. They would be black-on-black, so to speak. If, on the other hand, there were clouds of stars behind the nebulae, the dust particles in the nebulae would prove efficient absorbers and scatterers of the light behind them, and observers would see the clouds as dark masses against the starlight present on every side.

The spiral arms of our own Galaxy are no exception to this.

William Herschel, in his indefatigable study of everything in the sky, noticed places in the Milky Way where there were interruptions, quite sharply marked off, in the smooth distribution of the numerous faint stars; regions where there were no visible stars at all. Herschel thought that these were regions that lacked stars in truth, and that these tubes of nothingness, reaching through what, to Herschel, seemed a rather thin depth of stars in the Milky Way, were so oriented that we could look through them. "Surely," he said, "this is a hole in the heavens."

More and more of these regions were found (the number now comes to over 350), and it seemed increasingly unlikely that there were so many starless holes in the heavens. About 1900, the American astronomer Edward Emerson Barnard (1857-1923) and the German astronomer Maximilian Franz Joseph Cornelius Wolf (1863-1932) independently suggested that these Milky Way interruptions were dark clouds of dust and gas that obscured the light of the numerous stars behind them.

It was these dark nebulae that explained the symmetry of the Milky Way.

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So clogged was the Milky Way with them that the light from the central regions of the Galaxy, and from the spiral arms beyond the center, is totally obscured. All we can see from Earth is our own neighborhood of the spiral arms of the Galaxy. We can see about equally far into the Milky Way in all directions, so that what we *see* of the sky is symmetrical.

Shapley not only worked out the relative distance of the globular clusters, but he also devised a statistical system for treating the RR Lyrae variables in such a way as to estimate the absolute distance from Earth of the globular clusters. Shapley's system was legitimate, but there was a factor he didn't take into account, and that led him to overestimate the size of the Galaxy.

Again, it was a matter of light being obscured, even when dark nebulae were absent.

There is an analogy to this in the case of Earth's atmosphere. Atmospheric clouds in the sky can obviously obscure the Sun, but even the "clear" air of a cloudless sky in not *completely* transparent. Some light is scattered and absorbed. This is particularly noticeable near the horizon where light must travel through a far greater thickness of atmosphere to reach our eyes or our instruments. Thus the Sun at the horizon has its rays so enfeebled that we can often look at it with impunity, and, as for stars, they can be dimmed to invisibility.

Similarly, there are sparsely spread out atoms, molecules, and even dust particles in "clear" space. Space is, of course, far clearer that our atmosphere, even at the latter's clearest, but starlight must travel across many trillions of kilometres to reach us, and over such a distance even very occasional bits of matter will produce cumulative effects that are noticeable.

This was made clear in 1930 by the Swiss-American astronomer Robert Julius Trumpler (1886-1956), who demonstrated that the brightness of star clusters fell off with distance a little more rapidly than would be expected if space were completely clear. He therefore postulated the existence of exceedingly thin interstellar matter, and this has been amply demonstrated since.

The presence of such dust in "clear" space, something Shapley did not allow for, dims the RR Lyrae variables in the globular clusters, so that one calculates them a bit farther away than they really are. Once the Trumpler correction was introduced, the size of the Galaxy was reduced somewhat from Shapley's estimate, and the values thus found are still accepted today.

At present, the Galaxy is considered to be a vast lens-shaped (or hamburger-patty-shaped) object, which, if seen in cross-section, is very wide

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across and relatively narrow up and down.

The long diameter is about 30,000 parsecs (or about 100,000 light-years, or about 30 quadrillion kilometres). It is about 5,000 parsecs thick at the center, and about 950 parsecs thick out here where the Solar system is. For comparison, the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is about 1.3 parsecs away from us, and if it (or the Sun) were 15 parsecs away it would be barely visible to the unaided eye.

From the center of the Galaxy to its outer perimeter the distance is about 15,000 parsecs, and we are some 9,000 parsecs from the center. We are thus more than half-way from the center to the outer perimeter, which is about 6,000 parsecs from us in the direction away from the center.

From our study of other galaxies, we have discovered, in the last quarter century or so, that galactic centers are unexpectedly violent places. They are so violent, in fact, that it seems likely that life as we know it is completely impossible in the central regions of galaxies and is only likely to exist in the boondocks, where we are.

It is important to study all that violence from a safe distance, for a better understanding of what goes on might tell us a great deal about the Universe that we could not work out otherwise. Astronomers are doing their best to do so. The trouble is that the distances to the centers of other galaxies are entirely too great. We could afford to be closer and still be quite safe.

The center of the nearest giant galaxy, the Andromeda galaxy, is about 700,000 parsecs away, for instance. The only comparable region that is any closer is the center of our own Milky Way Galaxy, which is only 9,000 parsecs away, less than 1/80 the distance of the Andromeda galaxy's center. The only trouble is that we can't see the center of our own Galaxy, close as it is.

But wait — when I say we can't see it, I mean by visible light, because it is permanently fogged in by Galactic dust.

On Earth, however, when clouds or fog obscure the view, we can use radar. The short-wave radio beams emitted and received by our radar devices can penetrate clouds and fog without trouble.

As it happens, astronomical objects that are capable of emitting light are also capable of emitting radio waves, and at times these radio waves are emitted with great intensity. Such radio waves, unlike light waves, can penetrate great clouds of dust without trouble.

In 1931, the American radio engineer Karl Guthe Jansky (1905-1950) first detected radio waves in the sky. Those radio waves might have come

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from the Sun, which, when it is at or near the peak of its sunspot activity, is the strongest radio source in the sky (because it is incredibly near, as stellar distances go). The Sun, however, happened to be in a quiet stage, so that Jansky picked up the next strongest source, which was a spot in Sagittarius.

Of course, Sagittarius is the direction of the galactic center, and there is no question at all but that the intensely energetic beam of radio waves which Jansky detected is coming from that center.

With present day radio telescopes, one can zero in exactly on the location of the source, and it has now been narrowed down to a spot no wider than 0.001 seconds of arc.

This is amazingly tiny. The planet Jupiter, when nearest to us, is 3,000 seconds of arc across, so that the central Galactic radio source is only 1/3,000,000 as wide as Jupiter appears to be in our sky — and Jupiter appears only as a dot of light.

Of course, the central source is enormously farther away than Jupiter is, and if we make allowance for that distance, the width of the central source would appear to be about 3,000,000,000 kilometres. If the central source were transferred (in imagination) to the position of our Sun, it would be seen to be the size of an enormous red giant star, filling all of space out to the orbit of distant Saturn.

Yet large as that is on the scale of the Solar system, it is far from large enough to account for the energy that pours out of it. An ordinary star like our Sun radiates at the expense of nuclear fusion, but no reasonable amount of nuclear fusion can be packed into something the size of the central source and produce the amount of energy it appears to produce.

The one energy source that is still more efficient, is gravitational collapse. The growing opinion, therefore, is that at the center of our Galaxy (and, possibly, at the center of all galaxies, and even of all sizable globular clusters) is a black hole.

Our own Galactic black hole may have a mass of a million times that of our Sun. It should be steadily growing, swallowing matter out of the rich concentration existing at the core of the Galaxy, (where the stars are even more densely distributed than at the core of a globular cluster), and converting part of that mass into energy it radiates.

Larger galaxies would have more massive black holes, radiating even more energetically as they gobble matter. Active galaxies, such as the Seyfert galaxies (first noted in 1943 by the American astronomer Carl Keenan Seyfert [1911-1960]) must have still more energetic events taking place in their extraordinarily bright centers. As for quasars, which are in-

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creasingly being thought of as super-Seyfert galaxies, the events at their center must be the most violent of all in our present day Universe.

We could perhaps get an insight into all these violences and super-violences, if we study the not-so-distant center of our own Galaxy in detail, a center, the very existence of which, we did not even suspect until some sixty years ago.

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This is Gene O'Neill's first story for F&SF. He's 44, lives in California, tells us that he wrote this story before the closing of a GM plant in Fremont. Mr. O'Neill is a survivor of Clarion '79 and has sold fiction to Pulpsmith, Dragon, *and* The Twilight Zone.

Alchemy

BY

GENE O'NEILL

Weston wakes in a strange place.

He's lying on a narrow bed in a cramped, dimly lit room. Beside the bed is a nightstand, its chipped paint matching the scarred finish of the single wooden chair. Both the view and light from a tiny window are obstructed by a heavy-mesh screen, bolted into the pocked cinderblock wall.

Walls, chair, nightstand, bed ... everything is gray — a dull, dismal gray.

Weston feels a surge of fear....

A cell—?

No, he tells himself, it can't be a cell, the room smells too clean; and besides, the door is wide open.

Frowning, he sorts through his memory, trying to fit together the vague fragments of the previous night: a long ride ... being wheeled to this room ... a glass of water and a capsule ... a *gray* capsule.

It occurs to Weston that he might be in a hospital. Maybe ... but the room seems a bit dreary and run-down, even for a private hospital.

Still puzzled, he tries to rub his nose; suddenly, he remembers that he has no control over his hand, or arm ... or any of his limbs. He takes a check: he can still move his eyes; and, though he can swallow, he's unable to make a sound, not even a cough. Moving his head, Weston learns that his neck is painfully stiff. And, clearly, *everything* below his neck is completely numb, paralyzed.

As he turns his head to look back at the window, Weston glimpses a glittering array from the corner of his eye — a reflected sparkling near the foot of the bed. With an effort, he cranes his neck to look directly at the suspected source of the reflection. Sure enough, the gray blanket has worked up, exposing his toes.

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Relaxing his neck, Weston eases his head back to the pillow. The transition is almost complete, he thinks, chuckling silently; and soon, he'll be ... very special. He'll count! Excitement wells up, almost choking him.

Slowly the glee subsides.

Curious, Weston gazes out the door into the well-lighted hallway. He sees a man hurry by, carrying a small tray. Presently another figure passes the doorway. Both men are wearing neat white uniforms with blue plastic name tags.

Nurses—?

Weston decides the place *must* be a hospital.

Inwardly, he smiles, thinking that Addie had finally noticed the change and panicked, calling an ambulance; but he doesn't know for sure. He tries to visualize his wife's shocked expression at the moment of recognition ... but, for some reason, Addie's features remain blurred.

Dammit! He'd tried to tell her. She wouldn't listen. Addie *never* really listened to him.

Weston swallows, trying to work up moisture and wash away the dryness in his mouth. Christ! he thinks, twenty-two years with the woman — half his life. And now he can't even recall her image.

The thought dampens his elation.

Taking a deep breath, Weston shifts his attention to the narrow bed. Even though he's unable to roll over, he doesn't feel uncomfortable. No, he's quite relaxed, considering the progress of the transition. Well, perhaps a little warm, he admits, but that's to be expected in a hospital. Anyway, he's amazed by his relative comfort. He thought he'd be stiff and cold by this stage, and probably feel deeply depressed. But, no, that isn't the case at all. In fact, he feels the opposite ... euphoric, that's the word — the best he's felt since the change began.

Of course, he hadn't recognized the start of the transition. Christ, who could've guessed what was happening? Certainly not him. No, he didn't have an inkling — not until after the dream.

But he knew now! Another wave of excitement.

Weston's mind drifts back to the start: the numb shoulder at Murphy's Ivory Cue....

Weston paused just inside Murphy's, letting the saloon-style doors fan his back. To his right, two guys, sitting on stools at the closed grill, smiled and waved.

"Hey, Trim."

"How's it going, man?"

Weston nodded. Then he let his gaze wander around the huge hall: grill, bar, and snooker tables along the right wall; two billiard tables at the far end; vending machines and pool tables to his left. Recalling the photo in the *Mercury* a few years back, he kicked at a wad of gum stuck to the dirty carpet at his feet: ... *Constructed in the shad-*

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ow of the GM Western Assembly Plant near Fremont, Murphy's Ivory Cue caters twenty-four hours a day to off-shift auto workers ... with plush wall-to-wall burnt-orange carpeting, the ornate pool emporium was built and furnished in the grand style of the late forties....

Well, the big layoff had changed a few things, Weston thought, staring at the nearly empty pool hall. Now Murphy opened the Cue late and closed it before midnight, keeping the grill open only for lunch ... not even keeping the rug clean anymore.

Weston shrugged and checked the two customers at the bar ... both from the plant, but neither a shooter. He ambled over and ordered a Coors draught from Murphy, who had let his bartender go. The little Irishman served mostly beer — and not much of that — to laid-off GM boys.

Sipping the cold Coors, Weston turned the stool to his left, idly surveying the empty snooker tables. He glanced at his watch, thinking: Still early ... maybe some shooters will be in later.

Nervous, he got up and moved to the row of logelike chairs behind the snooker tables. He slumped into a seat and stared across the hall at the noisy foursome shooting on pool table No. 2. The loud but inept game of eight ball failed to hold his interest. His attention shifted to the other occupied table: a two-man game of straight pool. He sipped the beer, watching a good run. As the shooter, a tall man in a Billy Ball tee shirt, racked up his score, Weston cupped his hand to his mouth, saying: "Nice, Ed."

The tall man, a spot welder at the plant, flashed Weston a grin. "Thanks, Trim ... Say, you aren't interested in straight pool tonight?"

Weston shook his head.

Bored, he stared at the unoccupied billiard tables. They reminded him of the Louisville scene from *The Hustler*: When the mark invited Paul Newman — a straight-pool hustler — to his home for a high-stakes game; Newman's shocked look when the mark uncovers a *pocketless* table, saying: "My house ... my game." Of course it was all typical Hollywood bullshit — no straight-pool hustler would gamble on another game, especially not billiards. Still, Weston smiled to himself, remembering George C. Scott and Piper Laurie. He drained the Coors and set the glass under his seat.

As he looked up, Weston saw George Chacon come through the doors with a huge black guy. George had been a friend at the plant before he quit to run a body and fender shop in Milpitas with his father-in-law. The black dude was a stranger: heavyset, shaved head, skin almost apricot-colored.

George spotted Weston and guided the big guy over.

"Hey, Trim," he said, "this is Buddha Jackson ... an old friend from San Jose—" George punched the black guy's shoulder. "We played freshman

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ball at City College ... until they found out we couldn't read — right, Buddha?"

"Right on, brother," the big man laughed, exposing two gold-capped front teeth. He offered Weston his hand.

Buddha? The guy did *look* oriental, Weston thought, kind of like a sumo wrestler, except for the shaved head. He shook the man's thick hand.

"Buddha's a player," George explained, "looking for some action." He grinned. "I told him I knew *the* man in Fremont."

Weston nodded, accepting the compliment. He eyed the big guy more carefully, asking: "Wild or straight?"

"Say ... whatever," Buddha answered casually, stripping a C and H wrapper from a sugar cube and popping it into his mouth. He sucked on it greedily, continuing to grin.

But Weston sensed a coldness in the man's dark eyes, at odds with the warm smile. "Wild is normal here—"

Buddha nodded slowly, as if he were making a concession, and continued sucking loudly on his sugar cube.

"—Shoot the pink anytime," Weston continued, describing the local wild-snooker rules, "down it, you bead six ... miss it, you lose six. Got it—?"

"How much?" For the first time, the big man's smile disappeared, his expression matching his cold eyes.

Anticipating a big game, Ed and his partner moved into spectator seats behind Weston.

"Oh, the usual here is a quarter a point, dollar on the game, loser pays table fees...."

The grin edged back on Buddha's face. "Say ... a buck a point? Keep the bookkeeping down." He chuckled and took another C and H cube from his pocket. Deftly, he unwrapped it and tossed it into his mouth, dropping the wrapper on the carpet.

Weston hesitated, glancing at Chacon.

"He's no hustler, Trim," George said, shaking his head, "you're both in the same league."

Making up his mind, Weston rose from his seat. "You got a game, Buddha." Again he shook hands with the big man. Moving to the rack of locked cues on the wall, Weston noticed his hand was sticky. He wiped it on his pant leg, then took out his key and unlocked his cue slot. He removed a beautiful cue: A No. 18, handmade from white birch.

Whistling his admiration, Buddha held out his hand. He tested the cue's trueness, rolling it on the snooker table; then he aimed down the rail line, taking a few strokes. "Say ... *nice*. Set you back much?"

The cue felt sticky now. Irritated, Weston snapped: "Two fifty!" He stepped back to the talc dispenser, mounted on the wall near the open cue rack, and dusted his hands.

Buddha followed and selected a house cue from the rack.

Weston rubbed goose bumps on his

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arm — maybe Murphy had the AC on? He took a couple of practice strokes; and, even with the talc, the cue felt gummy. Damn sugar cubes, he thought, kicking at the C and H wrappers on the rug. A few more spectators had gathered behind table No. 1. Weston could hear their whispers.

"Say ... call—" Buddha flipped a quarter.

Weston said: "Heads." It landed tails on the table.

The big man broke, making a red; then he dropped the blue five (which Weston spotted), another red, the black seven (spotted), and finally missed on a banked red. Fourteen points — a good opening run with reds cluttering the table. As Buddha had moved gracefully around the table, Weston watched analytically: good smooth stroke — nice shot selection — always leaving himself in good shape. Grudgingly, Weston admitted to himself that the heavyset black man was indeed a player, as George had said.

Weston swallowed hard, fingering the fifty dollars and Addie's lucky shopping list in his pocket. Taking his turn, he noticed a strange stiffness in his right shoulder. That's all I need, he thought, remembering that he hadn't been shooting too hot anyhow since the layoff. And now, buck-a-point, his shooting shoulder goes out. "Hey, Murph," he shouted at the bar, "turn down the AC, will you?"

Buddha had left the cue ball lined perfectly on the wild pink. Smoothly, despite the shoulder, Weston stroked the six into the side pocket, running the cue ball over the spot. After Buddha spotted the pink, Weston shot it into the end pocket, again rolling over the spot, but losing his shape for another side shot. Instead of the pink, he shot a red and missed. He beaded twelve points....

Two close games: Buddha ahead eight dollars.

"The big dude's pretty good," someone whispered.

Another low voice: "He's got Trim against the wall."

"Uh-uh," Ed growled. "Five on Trim this game."

Buddha racked the red balls, then cleared both strings of overhead beads. Working a sugar cube into his cheek, he said: "Say, Trim ... how 'bout we up the ante?"

Weston touched the forty-two dollars remaining in his pocket. He shivered. The hall hadn't warmed up; it was freezing. And his shoulder had become a painful crick. Finally, he said: "How much?"

Buddha's grin widened, his teeth sparkled. "Say ... five?"

There was a nervous stir among the spectators.

Christ! Weston swore to himself. He would be playing short — gambling without the necessary backup money ... but he had no choice — he was in too far. "Okay, five it is."

Weston broke and scratched, giving Buddha four points before the big

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man even got up from his seat.

The score remained close as the red balls disappeared from the table, the tension increasing. Buddha chattered constantly to himself, to the spectators, to Weston.

"Say ... you work at the plant, Trim?"

His shot lipped the pocket, flipping to the side. "Yeah."

The big guy dropped a red, then the yellow two (Weston spotted), another red, then the black seven (spotted), leaving himself in position for a corner-side run on the pink. Corner drop (spot), side drop (spot), corner drop (spot), side ... *miss.*

Weston breathed a sigh of relief, but Buddha still beaded twenty-three points, the longest run of the game, giving him a twenty-point lead.

His cue felt stickier than ever, and Weston's shoulder throbbed. Christ, it's cold in here, he thought—

"Trim?" Buddha chalked his cue, then popped another cube in his mouth. "That's a weird name."

Weston answered slowly: "I'm in inventory control ... I was ... you know, trim for the outside." Yeah, trim, he thought, his mind wandering from the game. It'd been mostly chrome when he'd started in the sixties. Stacks of bins — cool, shiny, solid. He frowned: now it's mostly plastic or vinyl. He let out his breath staring hatefully at the big man. Everyone competing with Datsun and Toyota, he thought. The frigging Japs.

With an effort, Weston forced his attention back to the game. Stroke, stroke, *click:* the blue five dropped, the cue ball resting in position for a run on the pink. Weston blew on his cold sticky fingers, then tried to stroke away the dead feeling in his shoulder — stroke, stroke, stroke, *click.* A bad miss.

Someone groaned.

Weston slumped into a seat, watching the big man clean up, running half a dozen pinks. You Jap bastard! First the cars ... now me. His chest felt tight with his hate.

He missed again.

Ed left without another word.

The whispers grew louder: "... choked!" "Blew it."

Finally it was over. Weston had lost by sixty points. Bitterly, he tossed the crumpled forty-two dollars on the table, saying: "That's all I got."

"Hey, Trim played short?" "Nah." The answer heavy with disbelief. And then: "Yeah, big shooter ... *shit.*"

Weston's anger drained away as he turned to the few remaining spectators. "Friday, I get my union and unemployment checks." He faced the big man—

"Okay," Buddha said, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. "But, until Friday, I keep *this.*" He took Weston's cue and stuck another sugar cube in his mouth.

In Murphy's rest room, Weston splashed water on his face. His head ached, his shoulder was completely numb. He felt drained ... empty inside

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... just a shell ... useless. He'd been destroyed ... everything stripped away. He didn't count. Looking into the mirror, Weston shuddered, hearing the disgusted voice again: *Yeah, big shooter ... shit.*

He nodded agreement, absently trying to rub life into the dead shoulder.

Weston woke late the next morning, still depressed. He stirred a bowl of stale Wheaties and, unable to find any sugar, he drank his coffee black. Hearing P.T. practicing shots, he wandered outside to the basketball hoop over the garage. Christ, he's getting tall, Weston thought, watching his fourteen-year-old son shoot long jumpers. He hadn't noticed the boy growing up. A shot swished the net. Maybe he'll *be* a basketball player, Weston thought, visualizing P.T. in Warriors gold. The image raised his spirits.

Grabbing a rebound, Weston said: "C'mon, P.T., a little game of twenty-one."

"Forget it, Pop," the boy said, shaking his head.

"Hey, boy," Weston said, "you're talking to the *gun* of the '55 champions from Fremont High—"

"Oh? ... 1955?"

"Okay, smartass, your outs."

Weston was surprized by P.T.'s skill: the boy hit a few jumpers and one long set, but mostly he shot easy layins, able to drive around Weston with quick fakes; and he swished each of his bonus free throws. Actually, Weston was more shocked at his own ineptness — he *had* been the gunner on that Fremont High team.

The final shot arced through the air, spinning softly, rippling neatly through the net — deflating Weston's raised spirits. Twenty-one to three! P.T. had been right when he snorted at the challenge.

"Hey, Pop ... again for a Coke?"

"No, I've had enough, son." Weston shook his head. He'd turned his ankle early in the game, and now it was beginning to throb.... Christ, he'd better call Kaiser—

"Well, thanks for the lesson ... Gun!" said P.T. over his shoulder as he trotted off.

Too tired to sit, Weston leaned against the garage door in the shade, trying to catch his breath. The ankle was going numb.

Later that afternoon, after a shower, Weston headed for the kitchen phone to call for an appointment at the clinic; but he stopped at the door, hearing Charlie talking on the phone. Something in her tone caused him to pause, to eavesdrop. She was apparently talking to Jan, her best friend at Fremont High. She didn't sound happy—

"... No, I can't go and sit with *him* through the dinner and dance."

Silence; then: "But Jan, it's not the same. I'd be so embarrassed. It's easy

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for you, *your* father doesn't always look so, so ... scruffy—"

Weston rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"... I'm not going and that's *final.* I didn't even show him the announcement."

Weston felt weary as he shuffled across the room and flipped on the TV. He had difficulty concentrating on the game show.

"Daddy?" Charlie said, entering the living room. "Mom and I are going shopping. We need some money."

Weston stared for a moment, then nodded. "How much?"

She shrugged, flashing a fake smile — the gesture reminded him of Addie.

He pointed at the rolltop desk in the corner. "Get me my checkbook."

After finding it buried under a pile of bills, Charlie handed the checkbook to Weston.

"Fill in the amount," he said hoarsely. Handing her the signed check, he noticed a stiffness in his fingers.

That night Weston shaved before bed, even smacking a touch of English Leather on his face. The secret code, he thought wryly, waiting for Addie to come out of the shower. In twenty-two years he couldn't remember one discussion about sex; they'd always approached it obliquely, developing a nonverbal ritual — a routine. He tried to recall the last time. He wasn't sure ... probably before the layoff. Too much time at Murphy's. Well, that was over.

Addie came out of the bathroom, wearing her blue silk Japanese pajamas. Weston felt a chill creep over him. She stopped at the foot of the bed and sniffed. Smiling, she walked around the foot of the bed to her small dressing table and sat down. Looking into the mirror, she dabbed patches of white cream on her face from a blue jar; then she vigorously worked the substance into her skin.

Watching her, Weston felt a sharp twinge in his groin. He clutched himself, gasping: "It's spread!" Sitting up, he stared at his crotch in disbelief. The numbness, the dead feeling had spread to his genitals. "I, I, I...." he stammered, "I have no feeling, *here.*" He indicated his groin.

Addie glanced at him casually, then back to her mirror, wiping her white face with a tissue. "Oh, for godssake, Wes," she chided, "let go of yourself."

He groaned. "But—"

"*Dear* ... it happens all the time." She looked at him directly with a slightly vexed expression, as if lecturing a dull child.

He frowned his lack of understanding. "It does—?"

"Certainly." She smiled tolerantly. "Jenny says it happens to Bob Marshall all the time."

"Wha—?" Weston still couldn't believe the numbness. His throat tightened, he felt nauseous. *What* was Addie saying?

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She was nodding: "... middle-aged men. You're forty-four now, Wes—"

A surge of anger washed away his fear. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Impotence, silly," she answered, turning back to the mirror. "Jenny says it happens to Bob every time they go to a party and he drinks. Later he's a big Romeo, but no-can-do."

He was furious with her stupid nonchalance; but, without another word, Weston got up from bed and walked out of the bedroom into the kitchen. He jerked open the refrigerator, finding only one can of Addie's Lite. Sitting down at the table, he sipped the beer, waiting for his anger to subside. She hadn't listened, he thought, not one goddamn word. And that dumbass Jenny Marshall ... Christ!

Weston sat for an hour at the table, unable to turn his thoughts away from the spreading numbness. He vowed that, without fail, he'd go to Kaiser in the morning.

After he was sure Addie was asleep, he crawled back into bed. But he had trouble relaxing, his thoughts shifting from his numbness to the plant to Murphy's to the numbness to P.T. to Charlie....

That was the first night of the dream.

Weston was at the plant, in the warehouse. It was spotless ... and empty. Aisle after aisle of stacked bins. No chrome, no vinyl, no plastic — nothing. Walking down the last aisle, Weston saw a tiny speck of something glittering in the corner. As he watched, the speck shimmered and grew larger into a dazzling brilliance. He rubbed his eyes, blinking. The undefined mass of light was taking shape ... a figure ... a man-shaped figure ... a man clothed in silvery luminescence ... a, a, a— *

A chrome man! Weston gasped with the recognition.

The shiny figure reached behind his back and produced a pouch. From the small sack, he took a handful of dust — sparkling metallic dust. Then he danced up the aisle, scattering handfuls of dust that floated into the bins.

Weston blinked again.

He stared at the bins. The bins were suddenly full of cool, shiny, solid chrome.

Then, with no warning, the chrome man tossed dust over Weston's head.

Unable to dodge, Weston closed his eyes ... and he felt the dust cascade over his body like a liquid ... smooth, icy ... numbing.

Finally, Weston opened his eyes.

Only a dream....

Lying on the narrow bed in the tiny room, Weston realizes the dream doesn't explain everything. A few questions nag at the back of his mind. Why is the transition visible *only* from a peripheral glimpse? Why can't *he* move? The chrome man seems so flexible.

With an inward shrug, Weston

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forces the questions from consciousness. He tells himself that he is in an incomplete phase of change. He smiles. Soon, very soon, he will be cool, shiny, solid. He feels a chill of delight.... He'll show them all that *he* counts.

Knock, knock.

A wide, white-clad figure fills the doorway.

Buddha!

Weston shudders. No.

The big man's gold teeth sparkle in the dim light, drawing attention from his cold, snake eyes.

White-clad? A hospital uniform. Puzzled, Weston's gaze drops to the blue, plastic name tag pinned to Buddha's chest:

James Jackson, Psych. Tech.
AGNEWS STATE HOSPITAL

State hospital—? Weston feels a pain stab behind his eyes.

"Hey, Trim," the big man says in a low voice, "ain't this something?" He moves closer to the side of the bed, unwrapping a C and H sugar cube. Carefully, he slides the tiny square into his mouth, licking each of his fingers. Then he drops his hand to Weston's shoulder.

The pain in Weston's head throbs.

"Yeah ... folder says undifferentiated schizophrenia with catatonic tendencies," Buddha says, the smile disappearing. "That means you got the *doctors* fooled." He shifts the cube to

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his cheek. "But you ain't got *me* fooled." He pokes a pudgy finger into Weston's bare chest, emphasizing each word. "No, sir. You're hiding out in the wrong place, my man." The smile returns. "My place."

Even though his body is numb, Weston feels the gummy hand on his shoulder and the sticky fingerprints defacing his *new* body. He's choked with an overwhelming revulsion; and the headache increases in intensity ... unbearable. He feels a snapping, a bursting in his head ... then rage, the red fury clouding his sight. Blinded, he silently screams: You, you ... dirty yellow Jap bastard! Ah, ah—

Reflexively, Weston gasps a deep breath of air.

* * *

Buddha edges away from the bed. This sucker's really flipping out, he thinks anxiously. He backs to the door, then begins to turn—

An intense glittering makes him stop. He gasps....

Sweet Jesus! For a second it looked as if Trim were wearing a mask ... a bright, shiny mask. Buddha shivers and shakes his head. *No.* He studies the prone man's pained face — the beads of sweat, the funny color. A gray sheen ... but not metal. *No.*

Buddha's gaze drops to his own hands.... He tries to wipe away the lingering sensation — the cold, clammy feeling.

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Fred Pohl's new story concerns the robot town of Chicago and a couple of organic human beings who move into one of its best neighborhoods. The story will be included in a new collection titled MIDAS WORLD, to be published this summer.

The New Neighbors

BY
FREDERIK POHL

Ralph's dog was named Cissie, sweet little ladylike thing, except that she wasn't little. She was a Malamute, and there are ponies not as large. He loved the animal. Like many shy people, he found it hard to admit affection for another person — what if the other person didn't give affection back? — but a dog you could always rely on.

Even a big one, although Cissie had been a great deal smaller when Ralph bought her, at the suggestion of his therapist. "You'll have something to relate to," Dr. Kammerhill said, "and besides, walking a dog is a good way to meet new friends." The first part had worked out just fine. You could measure his affection for the animal by the simple fact that he was out walking it in Chicago's winter weather, with the wind from the lake driving the big flakes into his face as fast as they came down. The second part— The second part, he observed, was actually coming to pass, for one of the very few times since he had owned Cissie. As Cissie squatted in her ladylike, absentminded way, a person was coming toward them with expressions of pleasure.

However, it was not a very attractive figure that presented itself. From the neck down it was female, and well proportioned in a skintight flexible coverall; nice enough. Above the neck was something else. The head was a glittering bubble of one-way mirror, with sound diaphragms protruding from the vicinity of the cheekbones and a thing like a stubby elephant's trunk dangling down where you would have looked for a chin. "Oh, what a sweet dog," it said. The woman bent to pat Cissie, who stared up at her with shock and outrage. "She doesn't bite, does she?" the woman asked — a female voice, all right, although thick-

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ened and made raspy by the sound diaphragms.

"She's never bitten *me*," Ralph said, "but I don't know about you people — I mean, she's never been around anybody like you before." He felt uneasily that that sounded almost like a racial slur, but he couldn't help it. He just wasn't used to her kind around Riveredge Towers. The residents were sober, industrious professionals mostly, like Ralph himself. He didn't want to sound prejudiced, but—

The matter was taken out of his hands. Cissie decided that she wanted to go home, and even for somebody as strong as Ralph it was easier to go along than to resist that steady sled-dog tug on the leash.

However, it didn't end there. The woman followed him through the revolving door.

Waiting for the elevator with him, she wiggled the headpiece free and shook out a head of curly, pale hair. "I'm Lillian Albright," she said, holding out a gloved hand to shake. "My husband and I have just moved in," she said, peering over his shoulder to look at herself in the mirror. She tried to brush down her curls. "Those helmets really mess you up," she apologized, "but it's better than getting soot in your hair, isn't it?" And that made it even, because her expression changed swiftly as she realized that that, too, was sounding a little racial, since everybody knew that robot hair repelled soot.

And the final actor to play the part of prejudice was Cissie, who was curiously sniffing at the woman's knee. She looked up at Ralph, raised her muzzle and barked. "Cissie!" he cried. "Shut up! What's the matter with you? I'm sorry," he apologized. "She never did that in the house before." But then, Cissie had never sniffed a living human being before, either. And when the elevator arrived at last, she ran inside and crouched at the back dejectedly, not even pausing to lick Charlie, the elevator operator.

At least the woman did not pursue her. She only said sorrowfully, "I had a dog before we moved, but I didn't think I ought to bring it here."

"Why not?" Ralph asked. He was really puzzled. Lots of people had pets in the Towers. The pets flourished; the apartments were kept heated in the winter, and the air was filtered all year round.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I guess I just had some wrong ideas — bye!" she added, saved from still another faux pas, or another almost faux pas, by the fact that they had arrived at her floor. With three fast but separate smiles, one each for Ralph, Cissie, and the elevator operator, she was gone.

The elevator operator closed the door behind her, glancing at Ralph. Charlie wasn't much of a robot, not even fully ambulatory; he was purpose-designed to run the elevators in Riveredge Towers and make conver-

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sation with the tenants, and he rarely tried to go beyond his job requirements. But he was shaking his head as he let Ralph out at the twenty-eighth floor. "I never expected to see one of *them* in Riveredge Towers," he sighed. "What do you think, Mr. Ralph? You think there goes the neighborhood?"

Chicago was a robot town. Well, every city on Earth was, of course, because the human beings had mostly long gone away. At night you could see the habitants in orbit when the air was clean enough — that is, maybe half a dozen nights a year — and that was where the human race had gone when they finished dirtying up their homeworld. They didn't like the smells and toxins they had left behind, and their orbiting bubbles could be flushed out and restocked when they got too bad. You couldn't do that with a whole planet. So of Chicago's population of three million and change, just about three million were homiform robots. The "change" didn't amount to much. If you counted every organic human being in the city and suburbs, from Evanston to the Indiana line, you could not quite reach a total of a thousand. Mostly they hung around Water Tower Place and the Gold Coast, and a few of the racier ethnic neighborhoods. In places like that a few supermarkets stayed open to serve them, and even a few restaurants. It was possible for an organic human being to live fairly well along Michigan Avenue. Not so possible even a few blocks away; Riveredge Towers had been human-free until the Albrights turned up.

On his way down to the dig Ralph tried his skill at identifying organic human beings among the pedestrians and vehicle passengers. You couldn't really tell which was which when they were in vehicles, because the cars were all sealed, but on the sidewalks he recognized exactly three. Mirrored bubble helmets. That was how you could tell. And really, if the only way they could stay alive in Chicago was inside a goldfish bowl, why did they want to come here?

Ralph was an archaeologist — or a historian — things being as they were on the planet Earth, it was hard to know where one ended and the other began. Like with the Savior of Humanity, Amalfi Amadeus, who was the subject of Ralph's present researches: Should you try to reconstruct his life from documentary sources — that was the historical approach — or piece it together from the Late Human equivalent of potsherds and flint knives (i.e., the archaeological)? There was no doubt that Amalfi Amadeus was a real figure. He was perhaps the most significant human being who ever lived, because he was the one who had given the human race the gift of limitless fusion power from hydrogen; and without that, how could the world have reached its present state?

But you couldn't believe all the documents. Human beings, it appeared,

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had engaged in a systematic distortion called "advertising," or sometimes "public relations." Ralph did not mind that, but the same spirit of doublethink record keeping seemed to apply even to, for example, financial records — what were called "corporate statements" and "tax returns" — and, above all, to those classes of statements which were most solemnly sworn to. Court testimony and affidavits, for instance. Time after time Ralph had come across depositions which flatly contradicted each other and, although they had both been presented in a "court of law" with a judge listening, and in theory anyone who misstated the facts in such circumstances would be gravely punished, he had yet to find an example of anyone going to jail.

So that left the potsherds, or their Late Human equivalent. In this case it was the Amalfi monument in Amalfi Park. Buried underneath it was believed to be a cache of artifacts and personal belongings of the great man. The problem was digging them up. What made it a problem was that Lake Michigan, like most large bodies of water in these warm times, kept wanting to rise. Today it had lapped over again, and the backhoes were lined up waiting for the bulldozers to push the dikes higher and the pumps to suck out the water in the pit; and all of that was going to take time. All around the Amalfi statue the ground was soggy, and in the pit itself was at least three feet of thin mud.

Ralph didn't press his luck. He exchanged a few words with the bulldozers and the pumps — low-level intelligences always liked to hear from the boss — and left. If it were true that Amalfi Amadeus's secrets were under the statue, the secrets would have to remain secret a little longer.

He spent two hours in library research, leaning back and letting the data flow through his internal scanners, and then decided to give Cissie an extra walk. It was tradition to take a lunch break, even if, as was of course true of most robots, they didn't ever eat; and once again, right out in front of the Towers, there was the human woman.

This time she was seated at an easel overlooking the river. Since there wasn't much sewage anymore, the river ran sparkly clean on its way down to the Mississippi and the Gulf. Since the water levels in the lake had been rising, it ran pretty fast. It was a pretty sight, and Ralph paused to look over Lillian Albright's shoulder to see what she was making of it.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Ralph," she said, lifting a cloth off her paints to get a brushful of greens and whites. "I'm really glad to see you again."

"Decided to take Cissie out for a walk on my lunch break," he said, looking at her painting. It was barely begun, but he could see that she was running into problems. The flakes of particulate matter settling out of the air were changing her color scheme as fast

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as she could paint it.

"Oh, do you eat lunch?"

"I can," he said cautiously; it was true that Ralph had complete digestive systems, though he rarely used them.

"Well, then! You must come join my husband and me! You'll like Myron, he's a composer; no, I won't take no for an answer! We're in 11-E — in half an hour?"

Actually, he didn't like Myron. He had been intrigued by the word "composer"; it had suggested Beethoven and Brahms and Gershwin and all those old greats, but that was not the kind of composer Myron Albright was. He had a disk of his favorite work on the player when Ralph came in, and kept it going all through lunch. Squeaks, rattles, electronic hisses; Myron was what is called an aleatory composer, which meant that his work consisted of found sounds arbitrarily arranged — "And there aren't that many sounds in space, Mr. Ralph," he said. "Vacuum, you know. It doesn't conduct sound. So I really just *had* to come down here."

"And for a painter like me," his wife chimed in, "*endsville*. Just look out this window!" Far below, the Chicago River was chuckling along its rapids; the flakefall had stopped, and it was clearly visible.

"It's really attractive," Ralph said. "I guess it's been painted a million times."

"Not by me, Mr. Ralph. Honestly, I can't wait! You wouldn't believe how tired you can get of painting *space*."

"It's all *black*," her husband chimed in.

"Makes you think of funerals, Mr. Ralph — please," she added, smiling at him, "can we just call you 'Ralph' now? Oh, thank you! Anyway, you can see how *boring* that gets. It doesn't matter what you're painting, you know. A habitat. Or the Moon. Or half-Earth, or the power satellites — there's that same deadly background. Black. You can scatter stars around it all you like, it's still the same.... I guess you think we're overreacting?" The woman had been following Ralph's gaze as he looked around the apartment.

"It's very, uh, colorful," he said. Indeed it was. Each wall was a different bright color, spectrally pure — blue here, green there, yellow, red, orange. The whole apartment was a clutter, with artificial flowers in vases, crossed skis and crossed tennis rackets hanging on the wall, a shelf of trophies. And, of course, at least a dozen of Lillian's own sketches, water colors, and paintings. "I think it looks very nice," he said, his attention less on the decoration than on the table by the window. The woman had laid out a buffet of sliced cheeses and meats and breads, and she was filling a cup for Ralph.

She hesitated. "You can drink coffee, can't you?"

"Oh, certainly," Ralph boasted. "I often select that option."

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"I beg your pardon?"

"A liquid ingestion system," he explained. "Today, for instance, I included both solid and liquid ingestion. I suppose it's something like — well — I'm not sure, but maybe something like one of you decides to take a camera with you when you go out? Or an umbrella if you think it might rain? So some days I take the digestive systems, some days extra communications facilities — I have a lot of different accessories," he said proudly.

The Albrights looked at each other, smiling uncertainly. Myron cleared his throat. Then, delicately, "But you don't *need* to eat, of course."

"Oh, no."

"And you do it because—?"

"Well, because I enjoy it, you know? Part of the systems include chemosensors and tactile receptors. And" — he smiled — "sometimes it's for social reasons."

Myron said, his voice sounding embarrassed, "I know we must sound sort of—" The word that came to his mind was "condescending," but he didn't want to use it. So he took a different tack: "I mean, it's hard for me to understand why you bother. If you don't need those systems, why have them?"

Ralph nodded toward the wall, where the skis and tennis rackets hung. "I could ask you why you have those."

"Oh, sport," Lillian cried, enlightened. "Of course. Now do have some coffee! And help yourself to the buffet."

"Thank you," Ralph said. It was true that his digestive systems were well up to eating it, and even enjoying it. But then he would have to look forward to that messy business of getting rid of the by-product.

"And what do you do, Ralph?" Myron asked, hospitably loading up a plate.

"I'm a graduate student. University of Chicago," Ralph said, managing to get away without salad. He had figured out that if he disconnected his tasting circuits the food could stay in his storage chambers pretty nearly intact, and later on he could retrieve it and give it to Cissie. But Cissie wouldn't eat lettuce.

"Oh? What are you studying?"

Ralph realized there was a failure of communication here. He swallowed a bite of ham and cheese intact and said, "Well, actually I'm not *studying*. We don't have to."

Lillian's husband laughed genially. "Isn't it the truth? Same when I was in school. Cut all the classes you can get away with and then cram like hell before the finals, right?"

"Something like that," Ralph agreed, although actually it wasn't like that at all. He was, after all, a robot. Robots had no need to study, ever. If you wanted to know something, you just requisitioned that particular datastore and plugged it in. All robots — all the independent homomorphs, anyway — came off the assembly line with the basic skills packages. Literacy. Numeracy. A bundle of learned con-

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ventions, such as the fact that the red light meant to stop and you pushed a button to summon an elevator. Beyond that it was up to the individual robot to choose but nearly all of them elected to receive supplementary chips for such subjects as English composition, algebra, human history, and robot studies. When you had all that, you probably owned all the skills an average human got out of a four-year college, and so that was generally referred to as the bachelor's degree.

Beyond that it got harder. If you wanted a master's degree, you had to demonstrate mastery. That is, you had to rewrite the existing chips to make them better. That was hard to do, since they had all been rewritten many times already, but the doctorate was even harder. For that you had to create a new theoretical framework and propose "falsifications" — had to, in short, apply the scientific method to whatever was your chosen field of study. Well, that was more or less what the doctorate was always supposed to mean. The difference was that now it did. But Ralph could not see a tactful way of explaining that to Myron and Lillian, so he simply said, "My specialty's the life of Amalfi Amadeus."

"Oh, of course," said Myron, looking vaguely at his wife. Ralph realized with shock that these humans did not know who Amadeus, the greatest human being who ever lived, might be.

"Tell him, Myron," Lillian Albright said suddenly.

Her husband hesitated. "No, go on," she ordered. "Or I'll do it myself. You see, Ralph, we haven't been entirely honest with you."

"Not *dis*honest, though," Myron offered quickly.

"No, of course not — it's true that we had to come here for our work — but there was more to it. We were hoping that we could get to know some of you a little better."

"Some of us?"

"You, uh, robots," she explained.

"We're not like most human beings," Myron added.

"You're not?"

"Honestly we're not! Myron and I prove that you can rise above your childhood conditioning. We can accept a robot on the same terms as a human being, and that's why we came down here. We'd like to meet some of our other neighbors. Can you help us there, Ralph?"

"Well—"

"I know you're hesitating," Myron put in, "because you don't want to embarrass your friends. But I promise there won't be anything like that. We're not in the least *prejudiced*, you know. Can you believe that?"

Ralph nodded slowly. "I certainly can," he agreed, and it was true enough, because the possibility of being prejudiced against robots had never before occurred to him.

But helping them meet other robots

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was not so easy. In some ways Ralph was not very different from a human. He didn't know many of his neighbors — well, he was an apartment-dweller. Those are the folkways of apartment life. Probably in Augustus's Rome, Marcus Lentullus didn't know Flavius Pulchrus from the flat next door, except to nod as they passed on the narrow steps of their insula.

In the case of robots, the reasons were perhaps different. Robots prized their independent privacy. The first generations of robots had been no more than remote radio-controlled appendages to vast central computers. All the thinking was done in the central machines, and so there was no real difference between one robot and another. They were not individuals. Now the microprocessors that came with the Josephson junctions let a robot be as private within his own head as any human, and for that reason they guarded their privacy fiercely.

The other problem in Ralph's mind was that he was not sure he wanted to help the Albrights. The Brie and sausage he had felt obliged to ingest sloshed around in his storage cavity all afternoon, because he hadn't wanted to take the time to expel it for Cissie. Entering the library for an afternoon's work, he paused to engage his olfactories for a moment and verified his opinion. It was all fermenting inside him.

However, it didn't particularly matter, since no humans were in the library that afternoon. He plugged in and spent three solid hours letting all the unconsolidated data on Amalfi Amadeus pour past his receptors.

Amadeus had not had a very enjoyable life. At least half of the best years of it, Ralph observed, were spent in fruitless litigation. Humans were so strange! They would not let Amadeus have any share in the development of his great discovery, and then when he was dead they built him a monument. He did not really understand humans, Ralph concluded as he started home, and as he saw who was back at the riverside with her easel he decided he didn't really want to.

"Oh, Ralph," Lillian Albright called, her voice rasping again through the external speakers, her face completely hidden by the glittering headpiece, "just a minute, will you? I was coming in anyway."

"Cissie will be getting impatient," he grumbled, but politeness kept him waiting while she folded up her easel. It even made him offer to carry her gear for her, but a twitching of the mirrored globe indicated that she was shaking her head.

"None of that master-slave stuff," she cried stoutly. "I'm perfectly capable of cleaning up my own messes, you know." And then, as they crossed to the entrance to the apartment, "Only, if you *would* be a dear and just take the canvas until we get through the door—" And then, inside, he was allowed to be a dear again while she took

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the helmet off and shook out her curls. "Ah, that's better," she announced, starting to smile. Abruptly her expression changed. "Oh, my goodness," she said faintly.

"What's the matter?" Ralph asked, but her expression explained it all. She looked as though she had suddenly smelled something terrible. Tentatively Ralph engaged his olfactories and took a sniff. Right enough. Something was pretty foul. Part of it was no doubt the remains of the Brie and sausage, rotting away in his storage cavity, but there was more. "Oh, I know," he said, enlightened. "It's the garbage at the bottom of the elevator shaft, I bet. The super must have left the lid open. It's all right, though, Lillian. The farm people will come by to pick it up next week — they use it for compost, you know—"

"Next week?" she whispered, aghast. Then she tried again on the smile. "I guess that's just part of living here," she said bravely. "We can stand it if you can, after all — anyway, it's only in the lobby." But all the way to the eleventh floor it appeared to Ralph that she was trying not to breathe at all. She didn't speak again, just nodded and bolted as soon as the door was open, and the elevator man was grinning as he closed it after her.

Of course Cissie wouldn't eat the remains of Ralph's lunch — looked at him with astonishment and indignation when he tried to offer it to her, and would not be appeased until he had spooned out a plateful of real dog food. He carted the mess to the garbage disposal chute between the elevators, hesitated when he thought of Lillian Albright's reaction, and then deliberately dumped it. A little additional would make no difference at all, anyway. He returned to his apartment and was astonished to find his phone ringing.

The voice on the other end said, "This is Sergeant Gregory — I'm in 14-H. Can I come up to talk to you for a minute?"

"What about?"

"Well, I'd rather wait till I got there, if you don't mind."

Ralph frowned. He thought he could place the voice and with it the face of a *he* he had seen now and then in the elevator — a detective in the Chicago police department, he thought. "Is it about something I did against the law?" he asked.

"No, nothing like that. Ten minutes?"

"I guess that will be all right." But it didn't feel all right to Ralph. His plans for the evening had consisted of taking Cissie out for a walk and then listening to music until it was time to start another day; it was the way he spent most of his evenings, and he didn't particularly want it interrupted by having to tidy up for company.

But he did tidy up. Ralph liked his apartment, and seldom had a chance to show it off. It was a fully functioning

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dwelling. Even the parts of it for which he had little use or none at all worked. Plumbing, for example; there were very few circumstances in which a robot had any need for running water. Cissie, on the other hand, loved her weekly bath, and to Ralph it was worth the cost of a wasted room to supply it for her. He didn't need a cookstove, either, and used a refrigerator only to keep his replacement diodes in a stable thermal environment. And he certainly did not require a bedroom. Or, for that matter, a bed.

And yet, he might. At any time he might decide to cook something and eat it — many robots with digestive systems did, now and then; it was a kind of hobby. He might even want to activate his sexual systems with a *she* someday, and then a bed would be worthwhile; and, anyway, he had no particular reason to make his home space-efficient. There was no need to. When the human beings moved out they left millions of acres of floor space behind.

The hall door ding-donged, followed at once by the Malamute's deep bay. "Shut up, Cissie," Ralph ordered as he opened the door.

Sergeant Gregory was not alone. There were at least half a dozen robots behind him in the hall, although Gregory was so big it was hard to see them. He clumped in with the assurance of a former beat cop and made for Ralph's best chair, Cissie frisking beside him. Without looking around he declaimed, "These here are Willard, Ben, Florence, Renee, and Jim and Josie from the second floor. We wanted to talk to you."

"I sort of figured that," said Ralph, hoping his furniture would stand an aggregate of at least a metric ton of robots. It had been hard enough to find furniture that would look right in the Towers' wedge-shaped rooms — dozens of trips to the antique stores and junk stores on the Near North Side — and those old Castro Convertibles and Barca-Loungers had been designed for seventy-five-kilo human beings, not robots weighing twice as much. Ralph managed to seat the *she* named Florence in his favorite fake Chippendale — Florence was a flight engineer for Pan-Western Airways and a stripped-down, beryllium-chassised airgoing model that weighed little more than a human being — but for the rest he could only hope for the best.

"What we want to know," said Sergeant Gregory, shifting his weight and making the armchair creak, "is what are their intentions?"

"Whose intentions?"

"Those human beings."

"How would I know?"

"You've seen more of them than anybody else," Gregory growled, pushing Cissie away with his huge foot, "so you're the only one we can ask."

"You could ask them yourself," Ralph pointed out. "They're anxious to talk."

Ben spoke up — Ralph recognized him vaguely, a television newswriter or something of the sort, new in the build-

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ing; the elevator man had said he was just transferred up from some place like Savannah, Georgia. "I already talked to them," he said, his voice edged with irritation, "and I don't want to talk to them anymore. You know what they wanted? They wanted me to turn my radio down. That was just this morning!"

The middle-aged *she*, Renee, nodded, not very sympathetically. "You were playing Stockhausen, right? Pretty loud, too."

"I always play my radio loud," said Ben, "and if they don't like it they can just turn their receptors down."

"Human beings can't do that," Renee pointed out.

"Whose side are you on?" Ben demanded. "Listen! I saw this happen in Savannah — they're block-busting! First one or two move in, then the next thing you know the whole building's turned!"

"So you see?" Sergeant Gregory boomed. "We have to do something!"

His words were addressed to the room at large, but his eyes were on Ralph — who nodded and stood up, because he did, in fact, have to do something. Cissie was acting more and more agitated. He scratched the base of her skull. "Easy, girl," he shushed, and led her to the one place in the apartment where none of his present guests would have any occasion to go. "Too much company, right, girl?" he whispered as he opened the bathroom door for her. She looked up sadly, her huge body shaking, but she lay obediently on the mat, whining only softly as he closed the door on her. Cissie didn't like the hard surfaces of the bathroom, but she liked the chatter in the living room even less.

For that matter, her master wasn't enjoying it much either. His guests all seemed to be talking at once, in their various keys, Gregory's bass growl and Florence's chirrupy soprano bracketing the others. Ralph stood in the doorway, postponing as long as possible the time when he would have to rejoin them. There were not many human traits Ralph was sorry to lack, but at that moment it occurred to him to wish that he and all the others really required food and drink. Or at least were in the habit of consuming it. That way he could have put out coffee and snacks to welcome the company — and, more important, he could have started to pick up the dirty plates when he wanted them to go home.

"Ralph?"

He started as the *he* sitting on a bench by the doorway reached to touch his arm. It was the short, slim one named Willard, speaking softly so as not to interfere with the main discussion in the room. "Aren't you the one who's digging into Amalfi Amadeus?" he asked in an undertone. "Thought so. I think you're digging in the wrong place."

Ralph shook his head. "There's supposed to be a cache under the statue in Amalfi Park — that's where I'm digging."

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"Wrong place. That was cleaned out years ago, when the lake began to rise."

"Then where's the right place?"

Sergeant Gregory's huge head was swinging warningly in their direction, so Willard's voice was even softer as he said, "I believe all the stuff is now at the power plant at the lakefront. I'm with the Department of Structures, and I inspect all the fusion reactors — and I've seen it myself." As Gregory opened his mouth to speak, Willard finished quickly: "Come by sometime and we'll talk about it."

"Please sit down, Ralph," the sergeant was saying sternly. "I want you to listen to this. Ben?"

"I was just saying this Albright human wanted me to turn my radio down," the robot said, "and the only reason he gave was he claimed it interfered with his composing."

"Composing!" Gregory nodded, "Who knows what kind of noise *he's* going to be making? Now let's hear from Jim and Josie."

The old couple blinked uneasily at each other and at the group. Ralph knew them. They got their apartment free in return for doing odd maintenance jobs around the building. It was all they were fitted for, really, since they were low-level robots, originally built to work on the assembly lines in Detroit. They didn't have much in the way of conversational circuits. "Don't like to talk against tenants," Jim mumbled.

"Go ahead, Jim," Gregory encouraged. "They're not real tenants. Not like the rest of us."

"Was down in the cellar," Jim said, staring at the wall as though to pretend he wasn't talking to any person, "and that Albright human came poking around. He could've got caught by the rat-killer, could've got hurt. Could've sued the building. Had no business there."

"And bugged Charlie," Josie supplied, also addressing the wall.

"Come on, Josie, bugged him how?"

"Bugged him 'cause the elevator wasn't running."

"Said they'd call the cops," Jim added. "That what they said, Josie?"

"That's what they said," she confirmed. "Anyway, that's what Charlie said they said."

"You see? Troublemakers," said Gregory. "I talked to Charlie, and he said they were really rotten to him. Now, there's no call for that."

"Are you sure Charlie wasn't rotten to them first?"

Gregory opened his eyes wide at Ralph's interjection. "Now, why would he do that? None of *us* ever had any bad-mouthing from Charlie, did we? So we have to assume that they started it."

"Well," said Ralph, "all the same, I really don't see why we're all getting so upset. There are only two of them, and there are a couple of hundred of us."

"Now there are!" Gregory cried.

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"Did you forget they're *organic?* What are we going to do if they start to *reproduce?*"

All the same, the meeting broke up without deciding to do anything much, because there wasn't really, when you looked at it, much they could do. And Ralph was left with the feeling that the meeting with his neighbors had not entirely been a success. Sergeant Gregory had been distinctly cool at parting, and Ralph was nearly sure that he heard the words "Spam can" whispered in the hall.

It left him with vaguely unpleasant feelings. Ralph had not known any of his neighbors well before the meeting, but he felt a sense of loyalty toward them — more accurately, he felt that they expected him to be loyal. The effect was to make him angry at the humans for being the cause of ill-feeling between him and the other robots; robot psychology was not all that unlike organic.

He walked Cissie along the riverfront, a quicker and more cursory walk than usual, and when they were back in the apartment she lay on her blanket, gazing worriedly up at him. He didn't know what she wanted; but then, he didn't know very clearly what he himself wanted. He tried music, and played some of his favorites — Antheil mostly, but with a leavening of bop and rapp — and when he realized it was pretty loud he reached to turn down the gain, hesitated, and then irritably turned it a little louder instead. But Cissie was whimpering to herself, so he turned it down again.

The best thing to do, he decided, was to do some work.

It was customary for robots to keep more or less human working hours — that was one of the biases built into them at the factory — but they were not obliged to. And certainly working would be less unpleasant then sitting around his apartment, feeling annoyed.

Three possibilities suggested themselves. He could go back to the Amalfi monument and poke around in the mud for himself. He could go the library and input a few more hours of the previously unconsolidated records. Or he could take Willard up on his offer. One seemed as good as another, so he flipped a coin. It had to be a three-sided coin, of course, but robots can do that sort of thing, especially when they do it in their heads. It came up "Willard."

AMA-CHI Plant 257 was built on a man-made peninsula — well, actually it was robot-made, but old terms persisted — that jutted out into Lake Michigan near the Evanston line. As they approached, sunrise was making itself visible, or at least hinted-at, through the mostly overcast skies out over the lake. Up the coast was an old astronomical observatory, left over from the days when Northwestern Uni-

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versity's campus contained actual students and faculty. Now the telescopes did nothing but keep track of orbiting bodies, most of them inhabitated by the descendants of the human beings who had abandoned that and most other campuses on the old planet Earth. The streets were almost deserted, except for an occasional cruising cab and garbage truck.

Because it was so early, Ralph had decided to take the Malamute along for a run. A run it was. She tugged so fiercely at the leash that at last Ralph let her off it, and he and Willard chased her through the echoing empty streets. They didn't get tired. Cissie did. The distance was more than four miles, and long before they reached the lakeshore she had worked off her extra energy and was walking contentedly between the two robots. "There it is," said Willard, indicating a huge, featureless hemisphere that squatted over the choppy waters of the lake. "I'll come in with you for a minute."

"I have to thank you, Willard," said Ralph warmly, watching the Malamute scramble down the grassy bank to lap thirstily at the lake water.

"For what?"

"Well, for letting me get you out so early in the morning, for one thing."

"Wasn't doing anything special."

"And also for treating me just like any other robot," Ralph added. "I mean, I know I'm getting a reputation as a human lover."

"Doesn't mean anything to me," Willard declared. "I see humans all the time. Work with them, too — oh, not very *many*, I mean. But as far as I'm concerned they're just as good as anybody." He turned and glanced back the way they had come. Off to the west the clouds were beginning to be visible, illuminated not by the early dawn light from the lake but by lightning strokes playing among them. Ralph could hear no thunder, even at maximum auditory gain. But it was obvious that it was coming their way. "Going to get wet, I guess," Willard said regretfully.

"You won't rust, will you?" The question was meant to be jocular, although it was true, Ralph knew, that some robots neglected their anticorrosion maintenance — just as humans sometimes neglected brushing their teeth.

"It's not that," Willard said, sounding a trifle embarrassed. "It's just that I have to spend this whole day in my office and, you see, there's this human power engineer, on liaison, with the power units in orbit. On nice days he usually is out on field trips all day long. But when it rains — well, don't get me wrong. I really don't have anything against humans. But I don't like spending the whole day with one *near* me."

The door to the great windowless dome was unlocked, and the door revolved. That surprised Ralph a little, since revolving doors generally meant

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human beings. The kind of doors that opened and shut were not good at keeping pollution out, but a tight-fitting revolving door, better still two of them in series with dead air space in between, was almost as good as an air lock. It didn't please Cissie, though. The Malamute slunk through on Ralph's heels, whining softly — not at the doors so much as at the sound. The power station operated full blast, night and day. There was a deep roar that you felt rather than heard, and a much higher shrill whistle of high-temperature steam in pipes. When they were inside, Cissie lay down at Ralph's command, but her nose was twitching and every once in a while she gave an elephantine shudder.

"It's the chief engineer that brought the stuff here," Willard said. "He's organic. You know how organic humans encode their relationships?"

"You mean sexual relationships?"

"No, the other kind — parental, sibling, and so on? Well, in terms of heredity the chief engineer is a relative of Amalfi Amadeus's brother. Come along this way." Willard led Ralph up a flight of ringing metal steps, and the Malamute slunk after them, ready to be sent away if noticed, unwilling to stay apart from her master in this noisy place. "The engineer's name," Willard called over his shoulder, "is Harry A. Hensmacher — the 'A' stands for Amadeus. Of course, he's not really the operating engineer — it's just a hobby with him, you know how human beings are. But the funny thing is, he could be. He almost knows enough to do the job, except he's getting pretty old and he doesn't spend much time here anymore. This is his office."

Willard pushed open another door — also unlocked — and Ralph entered a pleasant room with an actual window, looking out over the lake. The sun was pouring in brightly, under the gathering clouds; Ralph cut down his visuals and boosted the gain on his olfactories to identify the scents in the room. There were signatures of pipe tobacco, human sweat, and — he sniffed again to make sure — yes, Irish whiskey. It was a comfortable room, and the Malamute, skulking in behind Willard, seemed to find it welcoming. She lay down as nearly out of sight as a Malamute can get, no long shaking.

Ralph looked at her severely, then shrugged. She was not likely to do any harm here, and anyway his interest was taken by a sort of shrine on one wall of the office: shelves bearing a photograph of an elderly, sour-looking human in the clothes of generations past; a framed patent application, and a model that went with it; a couple of notebooks. "That's it," said Willard. "That's what came out of the capsule under the monument."

Ralph's heart, if he had had one, would have been leaping with excitement; actually, he could feel his homeostasis systems compensating for the flood of voltage through parts of his data processors. "Do you think Mr.

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Hensmacher would mind if I looked at them?"

"I doubt it. He's had all this stuff right here in the open for years — we've all looked at it, now and then. Mostly the notebooks are technical stuff, but the old man put personal remarks in from time to time. Trouble is, a lot of it is encyphered.... Well, I'd better get to work. If Mr. Harry comes in before you're through, give him my regards." He leaned out to pat Cissie, and departed, leaving Ralph in possession of the room.

Amalfi Amadeus's own notebooks....

Ralph carried them over to the desk, sat down with them unopened before him, and allowed himself a moment of quiet exultation. The swivel chair creaked under his 120 kilos, and those human smells of sweat and breath and habits were stronger here. He looked around the room, trying to catch the feel of a place that held the presence of a human who shared chromosomes with Amalfi Amadeus, the man who had revolutionized civilization.

The room was not unlike his own office at the university, he thought, and then could not decide why. The color? No. These were ugly blue walls instead of his own restful brown. The furniture was older and tackier than his: a long couch with cushions sagging into the springs against a wall where he had his workbench and video displays; an overflowing wastebasket — Ralph had no use for anything like that, because he seldom used paper. And certainly his office had no view like Hensmacher's panorama of Lake Michigan. It had no view at all, since it didn't even have a window.

But something was the same — yes. The general air of inhabited neglect. A *used* quality. You would think that a chief operating engineer of a thousand-megawatt fusion generating plant — even a human who only played at it — would spend his time checking valves and running tests and tapping pipes with a hammer. Not this one. He seemed to spend all his time in his office.

Methodically Ralph flipped through the notebooks. It took some time. The time was not for "reading" the contents; Ralph could submit any printed pages to memory as fast as he could turn them, but this time he was not attempting to "learn" the notebooks. He simply wanted to leaf through them, to get an idea of what they contained and, most of all, what they meant in filling in the missing parts of the life story of Amalfi Amadeus. For that sort of thing Ralph's logic circuits were no faster than a human's, nor did he want them to be. For him this was pleasure. He enjoyed prolonging it.

The notebooks were spiral-bound pads. Some of the pages were tearing loose, all the edges were browned and tattered, and each sheet was filled with crabbed marks and formulae and wiring diagrams.

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None of that was of much interest to Ralph. The basic science and engineering of the Amadeus fusion process was well known — was about as relevant, actually, to the plant he was sitting in as Alexander Graham Bell's first carbon-granule microphone was to the auditory sensors in his body. He wished for a moment that he had thought to insert his engineering modules before leaving the apartment. Without them, the mathematics and the diagrams made little sense; but they also didn't matter.

What struck him with a thrill of discovery was the presence, here and there, on altogether no more than a dozen pages in the notebooks, of tightly written little paragraphs that were not in any language recognizable to Ralph.

Were not in any language at all, of course. They were code.

"Hush, Cissie," he murmured absently as the Malamute crawled closer to him, eyes imploring. The noise of the power plant was getting to her, but that couldn't be helped; for Ralph to leave at this point was simply impossible.

For these paragraphs, whatever they were, were *new*.

There was no doubt of that. Ralph had long since input the entire Amadeus bibliography — diaries, patents, letters, court records, incunabula of every sort down, almost, to his very laundry lists. He carried that data around with him in his store, and it did not contain anything like the paragraphs in these notebooks. He had what every researcher dreams of. He had autograph material that had never been consolidated into the main body of Amadeus materials.

It was not at all important that it was in code. Why should it be? The code had been constructed by a human being, for the use of a human being in his private records. It was impossible that Ralph's data-processors should fail to decrypt it.

Ralph quickly constructed the necessary algorithms, scanned the dozen paragraphs to commit them to his data stores, and then sat back. He appeared to be idle. HIs eyes were focused on nothing. But, inside him, his programs tried systematic substitutions all through the alphabet. First they tried displacing each letter one letter back in the alphabet, then two letters back, then three; then they tried the same thing with the alphabet reversed; then split in the middle and working both ways; then in more complex arrays. None of them worked. But then he hadn't expected them to. Since old Amadeus was going to use the code itself, it would have to be fairly easy, but it need not be that elementary.

So Ralph's programs began to count letter frequencies, and to look for the most obvious groupings. Three-character groups would tend to represent words like "the," "and," or "but." Single characters, mostly "I" or "a." In

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view of the identity of the diarist, the program made a special search for the six-character group "fusion" ... The whole process took less than four minutes.

Ralph noted that it had indeed been a simple one-for-one character substitution, complicated only by the fact that the number of places for the substitution increased by one for each line of text and that the text was written right-to-left. Even a human being would have solved that one pretty quickly. The fact that it was not in the general data base meant that not even a human being had looked at it since the data base had been compiled.

Ralph did not exactly "look" at it either. He didn't need to resort to anything as crude as a CRT display or print on paper. The data came direct from his internal scanners, registered on his internal stores, and it went a long way toward explaining why human beings had not included this journal in the file. It was not a document the human race could take pride in reading.

It said:

When I was an undergraduate at M.I.T., I made my mind up to do something significant for the human race. I wanted my life to count. I wanted to end poverty, bring about world peace, and liberate mankind from all its primitive fears.

The funny thing is that I succeeded. Quark-contained fusion power made all those things possible. The only thing that went wrong was the human race itself.

This is what I hoped for:

I wanted to make every commodity and service human beings required so cheap that they might as well be free. I wanted every human man, woman, and child to know that he didn't have to spend his life grubbing a living, but could use it for creative thinking, for art, for science — just for loafing, if he wanted to. I hoped for a massive explosion of creative energy in every field.

This is what I got:

A snowmobile in every driveway. A cabin cruiser in every back yard. A dune buggy plowing up every patch of sand.

When I tried to redirect the ways in which my invention was used, I was frozen out of my own corporation. So — let it be so. It seems possible to me that the human race will use these new powers to destroy itself.

And, frankly, I can't wait.

At Ralph's feet Cissie raised her huge head, moaned softly, and then growled. Tardily, Ralph remembered to boost the gain on his audio circuits. He heard someone approaching the door.

It opened. An elderly human man stood there, peering in at Ralph and the Malamute. "Who the hell are you?" he squeaked in a senile falsetto, and

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advanced into the room. He was cautious of the dog, not at all cautious of Ralph, the robot. "You've got no damn business messing with my things!" the old man snarled as he saw the journal open on the desk.

"I'm sorry. Are you Mr. Hensmacher?"

"I asked you first!"

"My name's Ralph. I guess you could say I'm a sort of a friend of your great-uncle's."

"Now, that's a damn lie," the old man piped, "being that none of you damn robots were around when my damn great-uncle was here."

Ralph made that faint beeping sound that was the robot equivalent of a sigh: humans were so literal-minded! "I only meant to say that I regarded him as a friend, Mr. Hensmacher." He broke off as Hensmacher, circling around the Malamute, snatched the journal off the desk and turned the pages with reverent haste, looking for damage. "I didn't hurt it," Ralph protested.

"You *looked* at it. You had no *right* to. You've got no damn right to be here in the first place," he added bitterly.

Ralph stood up, snapping his fingers for Cissie. "We'll get out of your way."

"And don't come back!"

"Oh, I can promise you that, Mr. Hensmacher. There's no need to."

The old man stared at him, and then his expression changed. "Wait a minute! You mean you read it? You know what it means?"

"Certainly, Mr. Hensmacher," said Ralph. "You mean you don't?" Evidently he had overestimated human decryption capabilites, at least for this human. "Would you like me to give you the text?"

"Oh, yes! Please!" cried the old man, his anger gone away.

Ralph hesitated. It was certainly a reasonable request, and Ralph's programming was intrinsically good-natured — enough so that he wanted to grant it; but also enough so that he didn't want to be around when the old man read his collateral ancestor's last words. Ralph was not particularly fond of human beings, but he believed that all creatures were entitled to preserve their self-respect.

When he caught sight of the dictating machine on Hensmacher's desk the dilemma solved itself. He picked up the microphone and a minute's high-pitched sound, like the screaming of elves, went onto record. "If you play that back at one-tenth normal speed," he said, replacing the microphone, "you'll get the clear text. Have a nice day, Mr. Hensmacher," he added as he left, but without much confidence that it would happen.

Ralph stood in the doorway, peering out. The storm had broken. Thunder rolled around the lakefront, and rain was pounding the sidewalks so hard that each drop bounced in a coro-

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net of spray. Cissie shivered, eyes pleading as she looked up at Ralph. He gave in and whistled for a cab.

As they got out in front of the Towers she bounded out of the taxi door and into the shelter of the building marquee, almost knocking Myron Albright over. The man was standing under the canopy with a pocket recorder, trying to keep from getting drenched while he recorded the sounds of the storm. "Ah, Ralph," he cried, "this is what I came here for! There's nothing like this in orbit!"

"You're ruining the tape with your voice," Ralph pointed out coldly, brushing past him toward the elevator. He didn't turn around. He knew that the human would be staring after him with that sad, pathetic, *organic* look, and he didn't want to be distracted.

"Take you right up, Mr. Ralph," the elevator operator said deferentially, sliding the door shut, but Ralph shook his head.

"Not up," he said. "Down. I want to go to the basement. Then I want you to get the janitor and send him down."

He paid no attention to the operator's curiosity, but led Cissie into the dark, dusty basement. It had been thoughtless of him to take Cissie along; he could hear her grunts of distress. When he engaged his olfactory systems for a moment he understood why; the garbage was getting pretty rank. "Just a little bit, honey," he said softly, patting her. "Then I'll take you upstairs — here's Jim now!"

"You wanted me, Mr. Ralph?" the janitor asked.

"Yes, I've got a job I want you to do — wait a minute. What's that?"

There was a quick movement beside the bin. "It's just the rat-catcher, Mr. Ralph," said the janitor and raised his voice. "It's only us! Go into standby until we leave!" The robot beside the garbage bin was so primitive a model that Ralph had not at first recognized it. It was hardly even mobile; its one job was to squat beside the garbage until a rat came along, and then, faster than any organic creature could move, lash out with its carbon-fiber blades and slice it in two. It was cheaper and more effective than rat poison, but it was not very smart. Ralph shuddered: suppose Cissie had blundered too close! "I always say," the janitor said, as though he had read Ralph's mind, "you shouldn't have organic creatures in a building. Spoils it for everyone. Probably going to have to turn off the rat-catcher here, if those human people are going to stay—"

"You won't have to do that," said Ralph. "All you have to do is open a couple of vents."

"Vents, Mr. Ralph?"

Ralph nodded, tracing the air-conditioning ducts with his eye. "Yes, there," he said, pointing. "I want you to open the intake."

Jim blinked thoughtfully at the ducts, then back at Ralph. "Air's supposed to come from outside," he pointed out.

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"Usually, yes. I want you to change that. I want you to make it come from right here for a while. Then later on we'll put it back the right way. Got it?"

"I guess so," said Jim dubiously. "Air from in here?"

"That's right, Jim."

"Not from outside, right?"

"Just go ahead and do it, Jim, all right?" Ralph watched until it was done. Then, satisfied, he took the elevator to this apartment. He made a quick call to Sergeant Gregory, with a report and suggestions. By the time he was finished Cissie was moaning again. He turned on his olfactories again and saw why: rotting garbage, dead rats, and a month's accumulations of kitty litter made a memorable combination, and it was all billowing out of the air-conditioning vents. The only question in his mind was whether it was as strong on the Albright's floor as on his own, and the way to answer that was to go down and find out. He didn't bother with the elevator. Without Cissie to slow him down, he took the fire stairs.

The smell was as strong, all right. Maybe stronger. And his call to Sergeant Gregory had produced results. From all over the building he could hear tenants' sound systems at top gain, playing Antheil and Stockhausen and rapp. Satisfied, he turned back toward the stair ... just as the Albrights' door opened and one of them peered out. He could not at first tell which, because it was wearing a mirrored globe. Then, "Oh, Ralph," it said through the speakers at the sides of the globe, revealing itself to Lillian, "I heard all that galumphing on the stairs. Don't tell me the elevator's broken down."

"Not as far as I know," he said, annoyed at himself for not having thought of that. Next time she asked, it would be. "I just decided to walk — for the exercise," he added; she could believe that if she wanted to.

"That's good," she said dismally. "It's hard enough for us just to walk around on the level, you know. Trying to manage those stairs would just about ruin us. And, ah—" she cleared her throat delicately "—isn't that, uh, garbage getting a little strong?"

"Always does around this time," he lied cheerfully. "Of course, they'll clear it out in a month or so."

"A *month* or so?"

"There's a new schedule," he explained, and stabbed the elevator button to end the conversation. He could not see her expression through the mirrored globe, but then he didn't have to. He could visualize it clearly enough.

When he got back to his apartment Cissie had thrown up on the rug. Cleaning it up seemed a small price to pay. Then Ralph threw the windows open. All that particulate matter would settle on the furniture, and cleaning it would be lots of work; and Cissie hated it almost as much as she did what came through the air-con-

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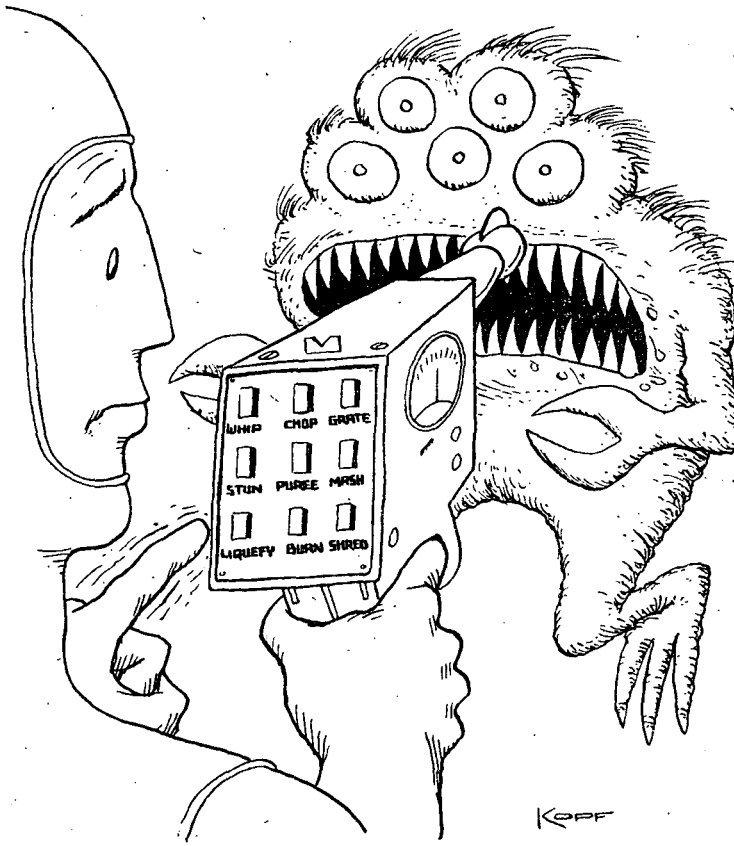
ditioners. But she was an Earth-bred dog, descendent of twenty generations of Malamutes which had survived to stand what had become of the Earth's air.

And it was worth it.

He was not surprised when, two days later, returning from his work, he found the elevator door open again and Charlie beaming out. The air was fresh; the radios were at normal volume; the elevator operator grinned, winked, stopped the car at the eleventh floor, and leaned out to point.

The door of the Albright's apartment was open. The furniture was gone. Painters were already getting the walls ready for the next tenant.

And somewhere, wherever the ghost of Amalfi Amadeus had settled itself at last, it rested content.



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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 32

In the January issue we asked competitors to submit possible sequels to any SF work. You seemed to like this one, and the response was huge, with lots of repeats, e.g., *Shunday*, E. T. C. Additions to John Norman's work proved popular, with such unlikely sequels as *Valley Girls of Gor* (Mary Mand) and *Quiche-Eaters of Gor* (F. M. Busby). And now, the winners...

FIRST PRIZE

The Moon Is Suing for Palimony, by Heinlein

Dune's Bury, by Herbert

The Forever-&-A-Day War, by Haldeman

First & Last Women, by Stapleton

No-Frills Dragonflight, by McCaffrey

Frankenstoned, by Mary Shelley
—Paul Harwitz
Sherman Oaks, CA

SECOND PRIZE

The Sheep Look Down, by Brunner

The Address of the Beast, by Heinlein

You, Blender, by Asimov

Five Golden Ringworlds, A Christmas Tale, by Niven

First Lensperson, by Smith
—Beth Hardiman &
—Dennis Macfarlane
Hartsdale, NY

RUNNERS UP

Candygram for Algernon, by Keyes

The Best Little Hothouse in Texas, by Aldiss

The Gun Control Laws of Isher, by Van Vogt

Lord Valentine's Castle Goes Condo, by Silverberg
—Jean MacKay Jackson
Tulsa, OK

Foundation and Garage, by Asimov

The Heisenberg Exit Ramp, by Delany

Mission of Levity, by Clement

Pie In the Eye In the Sky, by Dick

Dragon's Omelet, by Forward
—Paul A. Carter
Tucson, AZ

Son of Son of Man, by Silverberg

Report on Probability B, by Aldiss

After After Worlds Collide, by Balmer and Wylie

The Tardy Del Rey, by Del Rey

City Come A-Sittin', by Shirley
—Bhob Stewart
Somerville, MA

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The Snow Queen Melts, by Vinge

Wakesnake, by McIntyre

Dune Buggy, by Herbert

Who? Me Worry?, by Budrys
—Robert Coulson
Hartford City, IN

The Man Who Walked With A Severe Limp, by Tevis

The Drool Bush, by Aldiss
—Augustine Funnell
Lyndhurst, Ont.

They Walked Like Men, Again, by Simak

When It Changed Some More, by Russ

The Rest of the Best From the Rest of the World, ed. by Wollheim'

Jeffty Redux; Jeffty Is Rich, by Ellison
—Al Sarrantonio
Bronx, NY

COMPETITION 33 (suggested by Philip Michael Cohen)

Give an SF/fantasy redefinition to any word.
slander: defamation of mutants
Spinrad: brand name of an atomic-powered centrifuge
sundering: to remove an asteroid belt

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by May 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 33 will appear in the September Issue.

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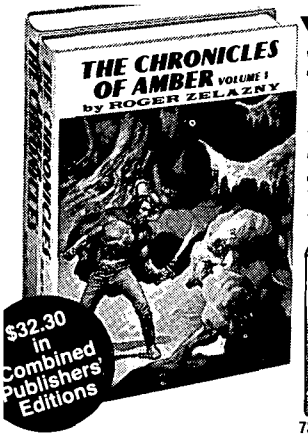

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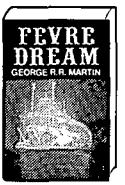

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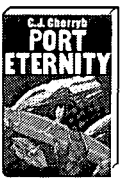

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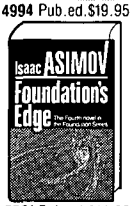

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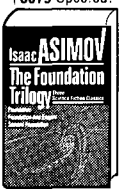

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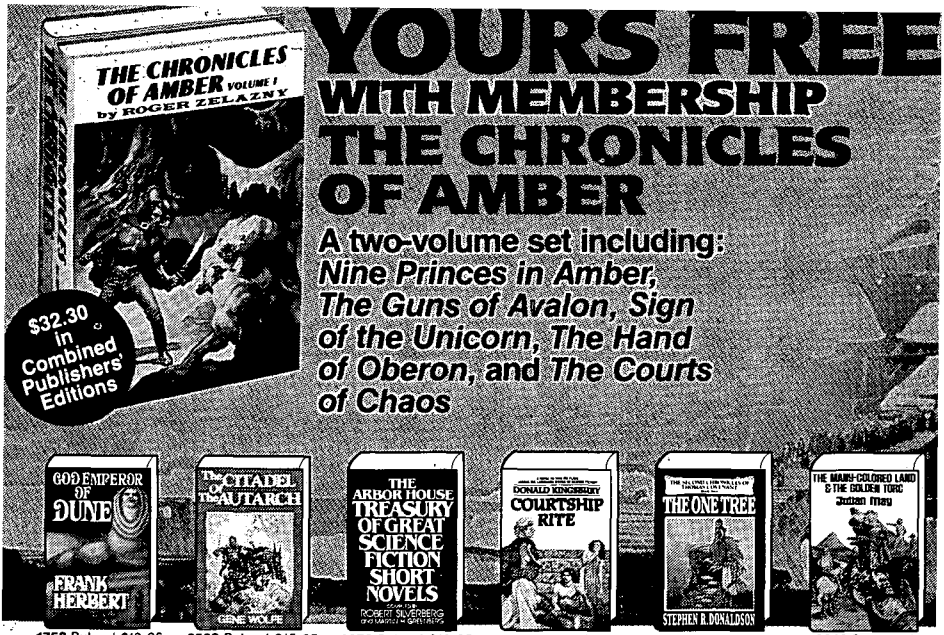
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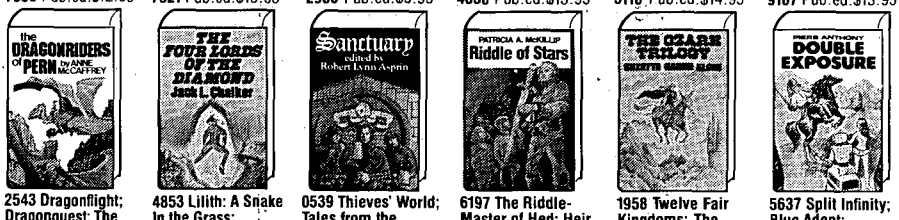

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